



**Critical acclaim for Richard Grayson's earlier books:**

"Grayson shows a sense of humor and appreciation of the weird. This writer is not afraid to take risks, and he can be very funny indeed...A versatile, interesting experimenter...Grayson knows New York City, where many of his stories are set, like the back of his hand...Compulsively talky and engagingly disjunctive."

– *Publishers Weekly*

"The incessant familiarity of the writer's secret self makes his world entertaining and bizarre. The dialogue is consistently, even ingeniously funny...bright and keenly made."

– *The New York Times Book Review*

"Grayson is a born storyteller and standup talker. Highly recommended."

– *Library Journal*

"An underground post-modernist who writes comic fiction crammed with details adopted from pop culture and the daily news...capable of less self-conscious, more serious (though not less comic) work."

– *Kirkus Reviews*

"Grayson is able to create a full range of masks behind which the artist peers out to make his criticisms of modern life. Among writers born in the mid-point of our century, he holds an important spot."

– *Israel Today*

“Where avant-garde fiction goes when it turns into stand-up comedy.”

– *Rolling Stone*

“Grayson is shaking funny ingredients together like dice.”

– *Los Angeles Times*

“Convulsively inventive... The reader is dazzled by the swift, witty goings-on.”

– *Newsday*

“Shines with intelligence and even wit.”

– *Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“Grayson has a splendid command of language; he is steeped in literary history, is highly inventive.”

– *Orlando Sentinel*

“Slices of life as we know it right here and now... funny, intelligently written and original. These stories accurately capture snapshots of our culture at a very interesting moment.”

– *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*

“A satirist and parodist so timely that his brothers and sisters may not yet discern themselves in his mirror... Clearly a master of the genre... Wherever Grayson casts his gaze, he manages to isolate panoramas of city and small town life in America from the 60s to the present.”

– *American Book Review*

AND TO THINK THAT HE KISSED  
HIM ON LORIMER STREET

*Other Books by Richard Grayson*

Disjointed Fictions

With Hitler in New York

Lincoln's Doctor's Dog

Eating at Arby's

I Brake for Delmore Schwartz

The Greatest Short Story That Absolutely Ever Was

Narcissism and Me

The Silicon Valley Diet

Diary of a Congressional Candidate  
in Florida's Fourth Congressional District

Highly Irregular Stories

And to Think That  
He Kissed Him on  
Lorimer Street  
and Other Stories

Richard Grayson

***And to Think That He Kissed Him on Lorimer Street  
and Other Stories***

Copyright © 2006 by Richard Grayson

All Rights Reserved

These stories originally appeared, in somewhat different form, in the literary journals and webzines *Mississippi Review*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Small Spiral Notebook*, *Eyeshot*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Barrelhouse*, *Harrington Gay Men's Fiction Quarterly*, *Opium*, *Hobart*, *Me Three*, *Cautionary Tale*, *Thieves Jargon*, *Apogee*, *Surgery of Modern Warfare*, *Edifice Wrecked*, *3711 Atlantic*, *Fiction Warehouse*, *Really Small Talk*, *JMWW*, *VerbSap*, *Rouse Magazine*, *Wilmington Blues*, *The Quarterly Staple*, *Tokyo Gumbo*, *Dreamvirus*, *Six Little Things* and *The Magazine Shiver*.

Published in the United States by  
Dumbo Books of Brooklyn  
Brooklyn, New York  
[dumbobooksbrooklyn.blogspot.com](http://dumbobooksbrooklyn.blogspot.com)  
E-mail: [dumbobooks@yahoo.com](mailto:dumbobooks@yahoo.com)

ISBN 1-4116-7595-9

First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Linda Konner,  
my friend for fifty years*





## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>And to Think That He Kissed Him on Lorimer Street</i>	1
<i>In the Sixties</i>	19
<i>Diary of a Brooklyn Cyclones Hot Dog</i>	25
<i>Heat of the Moment</i>	31
<i>Mohammad's Therapy Monkey</i>	58
<i>Seven Sitcoms</i>	64
<i>Vampires of Northwest Arkansas</i>	74
<i>Branch Libraries of Southeastern Brooklyn</i>	79
<i>1001 Ways to Defeat Green Arrow</i>	94
<i>My Life in the New York Post</i>	102
<i>Presidential Snapshots</i>	107
<i>The Cool Guy</i>	110
<i>Conselyea Street</i>	115
<i>The Lost Movie Theaters of Southeastern Brooklyn and Rockaway Beach</i>	126
<i>Shirtless Teabag-Eating White Boys</i>	139
<i>They Don't Make Nostalgia Like They Used To</i>	141
<i>Two Totally True Tales Featuring The Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan as Cupid</i>	149
<i>Babysitting Laurence Fishburne</i>	156
<i>Melissa and the Good Legislator</i>	162
<i>69 Reasons to Date My Aunt Aisha</i>	172
<i>Seven Men Who Made Me Happy</i>	178
<i>Schmuck Brothers of East Harlem</i>	189
<i>Three Scenes from My Life (with Special Guest Star Truman Capote)</i>	203
<i>Bottom, New York Times, Front Page, Tiny Print</i>	208
<i>Land of Golden Giants</i>	215
<i>G-d Is My Fuckbuddy</i>	232
<i>Forgotten Movie Screens of Broward County</i>	235
<i>98.6° of Kevin Bacon</i>	244
<i>Victory Boulevard</i>	246



## AND TO THINK THAT HE KISSED HIM ON LORIMER STREET

Laura says Labor Day is the most bittersweet of holidays. As a kid growing up in Canarsie, I dreaded the end of summer, but I also felt the blank sheets in my loose-leaf binders were all potential A's or 100's.

By October's first chill, my papers bloodied with corrections and bad grades – how did I ever become a writer anyway? – I longed for those endless days of July and August. Classes were boring, the days were shorter and grayer, and life generally sucked moose.

Eventually I dreaded Labor Day. Even today it makes me uneasy.

*In tenth grade at Canarsie High School, I was the founder and only member of SPONGE, the Society for the Prevention of Negroes Getting Everything. To avoid fights, I kept that pretty much to myself.*

*The first semester of eleventh grade English, I never bothered to read Huckleberry Finn because Miss Shapin introduced it by reverentially reading aloud from the book's opening and humming "NNnnn" when she came to the racial shur.*

*When she assigned us a book report on an autobiography, I wrote about My Shadow Ran Fast, by a white ex-convict I'd seen interviewed on the Mike Douglas show. She gave me an F and said, "You should have selected a more admirable person."*

*I found it interesting that Miss Shapin's name described her body. She should have failed me that term, but somehow I passed with a 65 after handing in an essay about my grandmother's manicotti.*

*As a writer, I have always lucked out.*

Laura, the baby and I are back in Brooklyn after our annual three-week rental on Fire Island, where I got barely any work done. Whatever writing I did manage to produce was dead on the page anyway.

Nick, my sixteen-year-old son, is also back from spending the summer in San Jose with his mom.

It's the Sunday afternoon of that antsy holiday weekend – cloudy and cool and lazy – when Nick comes into my office with his boyfriend Kevin.

Nick's been out since he was thirteen.

*I did much better my second semester of eleventh grade, when English was speech and drama. I was good at debate and liked the plays we read: the robots in R.U.R. and the Jewish veteran suffering psychosomatic paralysis in Home of the Brave. I had a crush on blonde Miss Squicciarini, who gave me an A on the essay I wrote on the latter play, explaining why the film version changed the hero into a black man.*

*My final grade for the term was good enough to get me into Advanced Drama the next year. I'd be the only twelfth-grader in the class who hadn't taken Drama with Mr. Haring all junior year.*

"Hey, Dad, how'd you like a chance to relive your past?" Nick asks me.

I wait for the next sandal to drop.

*I didn't know anyone that first day in Advanced Drama, so I sat alone at a two-person desk, feeling like a creepy loser. Mr. Haring had Stephen come down from the back row to sit next to me.*

*Before that first class was over, Stephen whispered to me, nodding his head toward Mr. Haring writing on*

*the blackboard the title of the Stanislavsky paperback we had to buy:*

*"He hates me."*

"No thanks" is my instinctive reply to Nick's question, but instead I just sigh and lift my eyebrows, a clichéd gesture my characters also favor.

"I'm talking about your CBGB-and-Club-82-going, Ramones-and-Blondie-listening, hanging-with-Legs-McNeil days," Nick says.

I wonder if the baby will talk like her half-brother when she's older.

*Mr. Haring made us do four scenes with a partner that semester. For the first one, Stephen and I did Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? with me as Nick and him as George. At our first rehearsal at Stephen's apartment, I suggested he imitate Richard Burton's accent in the movie.*

*Stephen rolled his eyes. "What are you, an idiot?" he said.*

*I nodded. "It's something I'm very proud of." I told him about SPONGE and everything.*

As Nick begins what promises to be a long spiel, Kevin stares at the ceiling. Half-Puerto Rican and half-Chinese, Kevin is a year and a half older than Nick. He's been a college student – at NYU – for at least a week now. Still in high school, Nick will be a senior at Stuyvesant, where they met in the Gay-Straight Alliance.

Kevin's the more sensible of the two, and I say that only because I know Nick a lot longer and better.

The son of two professors at Brooklyn Law School, Kevin takes over the case and lays out the facts: He turned eighteen last May and can get into tonight's 10 p.m. show in the basement of Northsix, one of those clubs

that have made Williamsburg the hipster capital of the known universe.

But Nick won't be legal till December 2006, so seeing the quadruple bill of punk bands tonight will be impossible unless he's accompanied by a parent or guardian. I am Nick's parent. Therefore, only if I accompany them to Northsix to hear Seein Red, Kriegstanz, Bury the Living, and Kill Your Idols – will Nick be able to get in.

*After his many caustic comments on our acting after Stephen and I did the scene from Virginia Woolf, Mr. Haring asked us a question:*

*"Why did you make the choice to play them as pansies?"*

A boy of sixteen should be far more embarrassed to be seen at night in Williamsburg with his father than he would be upset about missing what sounds like a middling show. Even I know the basement venue has to be inferior to what's going on upstairs. I've become Paul Lynde in *Bye, Bye Birdie*: I don't know what's wrong with these kids today.

*I didn't get it. Everyone knew Mr. Haring was homosexual, so I couldn't understand why he'd use a word like "pansies."*

*"It's the same reason he hates me," Stephen told me while we walked up Rockaway Parkway after school.*

"Do they really check ID?" I ask. Nick already has a decent black goatee. This morning, noticing his caduceus of chest hair, Laura felt she had to remind him to wear a T-shirt when he comes to the breakfast table for his Cocoa Puffs. With commendable logic, my son told his stepmother that he'd give her request more weight if she

hadn't made it while baring her own left breast to feed Lucy.

Nick actually seems older than the angelically smooth-faced Kevin, whose dyed-red emo bangs make him look twelve to my presbyopic eyes.

But even if he's too young to remember the last Democratic mayor, Kevin is a legal adult who doesn't need *his* dad – who, by the way, who wouldn't score half as high as *moi* on the hipster-o-meter – to accompany him to Northsix tonight.

*I did my other scenes with girls, playing the brutally seductive Jean to Karen Kramer's Miss Julie, wearing my tightest T-shirt to be Stanley Kowalski opposite Nina Camerlengo's Blanche du Bois, getting into bed (four desks moved together) with my wife Rosemary Benevenuto in The Fourposter.*

*Still, Stephen and I remained tight and took the B-6 bus together our first day at Brooklyn College.*

"Yeah, they're very strict," Nick says. "You know, alcohol and all, they're afraid of trouble."

"Okay," I say. "I don't have to change, do I?"

"Nah, with those cargo shorts you'll fit right in."

"Fongool," I tell my son.

*In my freshman year I became political, grew my hair long, had a girlfriend who thought she was the next Joan Baez. Stephen majored in Speech and Theatre, started pronouncing his name "Steff-in," got campier every time I'd have coffee with him every couple of weeks at Sugar Bowl.*

*Sometimes he still made me crack up the way he did in high school. Other times he'd annoy me, like the time he said I was getting so pretentious that if someone*



*stuck a pin in me, I'd deflate and fly around the room like a pricked balloon.*

*Stephen had his own demons. One day we were walking to Baskin-Robbins on Flatbush Avenue and suddenly he said we needed to cross the street. Only when I pressed him later did he tell me he'd seen his father coming in the other direction.*

*Stephen's parents divorced when he was ten.*

*"You don't know what it's like to hear all that shit all night and see your mother with two black eyes in the morning," he told me.*

"Sweet," says Nick in response to my atavistic Brooklyn curse.

Then, to Kevin: "Let's go to Grand Street and get him a pair of earplugs."

"Hey, I don't need them," I tell him. "You think I'm not man enough to hear loud punk music? I was listening to that shit long before you were born."

"Um, Mr. G, we've got earplugs for us already," Kevin says, smiling beatifically. "We don't want to go deaf like you baby boomers after years of going to arena concerts and listening to your old, what do you call them, *records*."

"Think of them as ear condoms, Dad," Nick says. He and Kevin make eye contact. "You know the two of us always play it safe like the public service announcements tell us to." Now the smiles are devilish.

*Beatific, devilish:* I always fall back on the easiest choices.

I tell Nick and Kevin to get out of my office, that I can still save part of the day and continue to churn out tortured prose.

*As I got more involved with politics and started going out with Yolanda, I didn't see Stephen that much.*

*By the start of my senior year, fighting with Yolanda took up bigger and bigger chunks of my time.*

*One night in October – it was a Jewish holiday, so things were quiet in the city – Yolanda and I ran into Stephen and a friend at Azuma on West Eighth Street.*

*The West Village was the place where Yolanda and I felt most comfortable, so we went there for a lot of our dates. It wasn't that cool for us to be seen together in Canarsie.*

*Stephen's friend John actually looked a lot like Stephen: tall, dark curly hair, kind of stocky.*

*Yolanda and I had been bickering all evening and she welcomed the presence of other people. Maybe it would avoid yet another night of breaking up and trying to get back together.*

*So we walked across the street with Stephen and John to Orange Julius and then accompanied them to a movie they'd already seen: Pink Flamingos. I'd heard about it, of course, but assumed Yolanda wouldn't be interested.*

*Yet after it was over, walking up Sixth Avenue, John and Stephen on either side of her, me hugging the sidewalk, she said, "That was the most disgusting film I've ever seen. I loved it." Usually Yolanda and I would take the IRT to the end of the line, Flatbush Avenue/ Brooklyn College, and we'd get the B-6 bus to take us back to Canarsie. But John lived in Williamsburg – the whole other side of Brooklyn – so that night we took the LL train with them at Sixth Avenue and Fourteenth Street.*

*John's stop came up surprisingly soon after we got out of Manhattan. It was pretty late, and the subway car just contained the four of us and the conductor. As we screeched to a halt at Lorimer Street, Stephen got up with John to the door. Just before it opened, he put his arm around John and kissed him. On the mouth. Deep.*

*I'd never seen two guys kiss each other like that and for a minute I thought I was going to throw up. Yolanda was taken aback too, but after a few more stops she and Stephen were swapping supposedly funny stories that all centered on my failings as a human being.*

*By the end of the LL line at Rockaway Parkway, I was fuming and they were singing an off-tune "Never Gonna Fall in Love" together. Stephen even told Yolanda about SPONGE.*

I try to write all afternoon but nothing comes out right.

*After we walked past the block where Stephen lived with his mother and little brother – I barely managed to get out a curt "G'night" – I said to Yolanda, "You know, I got kind of nauseous when Stephen kissed John on the train like that. And I feel so weird about it."*

*I prided myself on being so radical. When nobody else would speak for HI, the gay student club, at the student assembly budget meeting, I'd made an impromptu speech about how important it was that we fund them.*

*Stephen, of course, would never be a part of a student organization like Homosexuals Intransigent. He met John at the Newman Club.*

*"The kiss was a little weird, but you'll get used to it," Yolanda said. "I'm sure some people would get nauseous watching you kiss me, you know?"*

*We walked a couple of paces.*

*"Except nobody ever sees that, of course," she said. "Not even our friends at school."*

*"I've told you, I don't like public displays of affection."*

*She sighed. It was too late and I was too tired to break up again tonight. Yolanda didn't want to come back*

*to my parents' basement with me, so I just let her go down the block to her apartment in the projects.*

As we cross underneath the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway in the early evening, my son is uncharacteristically ebullient. Or maybe this is how he always is and I just don't pay attention.

"Don't worry, Dad," he says. "If you don't survive the show, I'll tell Laura you loved her. I'll even lie and tell Mom the same thing. And until Laura finds a young studly new husband closer to her own age, I'll help her raise Lucy like she was my own child."

"Sometimes I think Homer Simpson has the right idea when he says, 'Why, you little...' and starts choking Bart," I say.

"Mr. G!" Kevin says. "Surely you're joking about the choking." Kevin's mom teaches the Domestic Violence Workshop at Brooklyn Law School, but he's a good enough straight man to set up my next line.

"Don't call me Shirley," I tell my son's boyfriend.

*I kept wondering why I was so freaked out by that kiss. After all, I'd known Stephen was gay from the first day I'd met him. I figured I probably should watch them do it again so I'd get used to it, but I had other things to deal with, like the end of my relationship with Yolanda.*

*It took a long time for me to get over Yolanda, longer than it did with the girls who came before her. I didn't know why. We'd pass each other at school without speaking. I heard she and Stephen sometimes did stuff together and I considered his friendship with her another act of betrayal, like his telling her about SPONGE.*

*By then the only person besides Yolanda that Stephen and I knew in common was Veronica Reilly, a girl from my creative writing class who wrote these playful stories the professor went crazy over.*

*My stories usually got good comments, but they weren't entertaining and graceful like Veronica's. Somehow the class took her little humorous tales more seriously than my earnest productions.*

"That must have funny back in the day, Dad," Nick says about my "Don't call me Shirley" line as we pass a combination Malaysian-Peruvian restaurant where they have video screens in the restrooms.

*Two weeks after our Advanced Fiction Writing class workshopped a barely-disguised version of my breakup with Yolanda called "Misplaced Trust," Veronica handed in a whimsical story called "The Misplaced Trout." She claimed that the first time she looked at my story, she'd misread the title. "The Misplaced Trout" was so good that even I couldn't help admiring it.*

*I wasn't interested in Veronica and was pretty sure she was a lesbian anyway, but we started hanging out together. She opened my eyes to Donald Barthelme and a lot of other writers*

*. Veronica told me Stephen was heartbroken over John. She said that John had started to feel really guilty about what they were doing, decided to go back to dating girls, had gotten engaged to his old girlfriend.*

*It was Veronica who got Stephen and me to be friends again. I never apologized or anything. Sometimes Stephen and I would hang out with Veronica and her equally dykey twin sister Constance – Ronnie and Connie, their parents called them – but other times we'd go to movies and do shit by ourselves.*

*Late one night at the Canarsie bagel bakery as we were waiting to get some hot poppy-seed bagels straight out of the oven, Stephen told me that kiss on the LL train was a crucial moment in his relationship with John.*

*"He couldn't handle stuff like that," Stephen said. "He didn't want to admit what he was. Is. He didn't want other people to know. One day he'll be married with kids and I know he's going to show up at some bar and I'll tell everyone what a fucking phony and creep he is."*

*"You're right," I said.*

*It struck me then that Stephen was actually the friend I'd had the longest.*

As we pass the Galapagos Art Space a few doors up from Northsix, I say, "There still must be time for you guys to get to an all-ages show someplace."

Nick just snorts. Kevin says, "Oh come on, Mr. G, it'll be the bomb."

"I'll take your word for it, Mr. C-R," I tell Kevin. His last name is Chin-Ramos, which the young black guy checking ID's in front of Northsix's entryway can see when he looks at Kevin's driver's license.

Nick shows his photo ID and I show mine. "I'm his father," I tell the ID-check guy. Nodding, he can see that I'm Richard Thomas Grayson and he's Nicolas Stephen Grayson.

When he was three, Nick made me read *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* over and over again.

As I pay for the three of us to get into the basement and a girl with heavy black eyeliner stamps our hands, I find myself thinking: "Congratulations, today is your day! You're off to great places, you're off and away!"

*After graduation, Stephen and I saw each other less frequently, but when he was hospitalized with severe back problems – they couldn't diagnose the cause but I suspected it was all the weight-lifting he'd been doing – I went to see him every day.*

*He was in severe pain, made worse by a bad case of hospital constipation caused by the Vicodin they were*

*giving him. During one of my visits, the Catholic chaplain came by. Stephen asked him, "Can you bless my bedpan, Father?"*

*The priest pursed his lips the same way the conductor in the LL train did when Stephen and John had kissed.*

*After his release from Maimonides, Stephen still was in a lot of pain and could barely walk, even with his cane. His mother had to order a hospital bed. The only one of his friends with a car, I drove him to doctors all over Brooklyn.*

*We went to an orthopedic surgeon on Ocean Parkway who five years later would be all over the tabloids for murdering his wife and running off to Brazil with his nurse.*

*In 1980, around the time my first book was published, Stephen was still taking acting classes and going to auditions during the day while he worked nights at the newsstand in the Abbey-Victoria Hotel. "I can't believe I had a murderer for a doctor," he said when he called me after seeing the Post headline.*

*"He didn't help you much anyway," I said.*

I'm surprised the basement venue is so small. There are only about a dozen people in the audience, most standing, a few on the single row of seats that look like they came out of an old movie theater. Most everyone puts in their earplugs right away. When the first band – four guys from Holland – starts playing, I feel actual pain.

I stay as far away as possible from Nick and Kevin as well as the band. Punks don't need their papas close by. There are a few older people around – nobody remotely near my age, of course – and probably most of those guys only look older because they take don't care of themselves.

Even with distance and the earplugs, the music's way too loud for me. Besides, I've got ants in my pants once the second band up gets past their first song, an angry rant about Bush. So I make my way upstairs, decide not to get anything at the bar, and head outside.

The air is almost-autumn brisk as I lean up against the building's brick wall. I watch the strolling hipsters, tourists and trustafarian kids when suddenly I see a familiar face: Nick's friend Quinn.

"Hey," she says. Or maybe it's *he* says – Quinn is a trannyboy who's been to the house a few times.

Quinn takes my hand and pumps it in a hard handshake. She's got a cigarette in her mouth and I remind myself that I'm not every young person's parent.

"How's it going?" I ask.

"Okay," she says. "Working hard."

"Sounds good," I say.

"I'm taking testosterone now," Quinn says.

"How's that going?"

"Good, real good. I mean, I don't like putting something artificial in my body, but it's not really artificial for me, you know?"

I nod. "Not like *that*," I say, pointing to the cigarette. I can't help myself.

"Yeah, I keep saying I'll quit when I'm twenty-five," Quinn says. "But you're right, I should do it now. It would help me save for the surgery."

I remember at the house she said she's having only the top done: "I'm sick of Ace bandages." And: "What do I need a cock for? My masculinity is in my head."

I look at Quinn and nod one more time. "Well, nice to see you again. You're looking good."

He smiles. "Later, man," he says. "Say hi to Nick for me."

As Quinn walks down the street, I don't bother to notice if his gait is masculine or feminine. Who can tell



nowadays anyway? I live in a neighborhood where neighbors notice my lack of body art. Two years ago a gay bar opened around the corner from us on Lorimer Street. The subway station has fresh ads telling riders that meth is death.

From out here, Seein Red's music sounds better than it must in the thick of it downstairs.

I think about Quinn and then I think about little Lucy, asleep in her crib: oh, the places they'll go. Oh, the *agita* they'll give their parents.

*When my first book came out, Stephen was the one to call me late at night from the hotel newsstand to tell me good news – "Richard, you made Liz Smith's column!" – and not-so-good news: "There's a review in The Village Voice. I wouldn't quite call it a rave." That was a nice way to characterize a line like "Grayson is an awkward stylist and his work suffers from sentimentality and easy laughs."*

*By then Stephen had given up trying to make it as an actor. To my surprise, he applied to and got accepted at Brooklyn Law School. He went part-time, in the evenings, and took the day shift at the newsstand. He reported that most of his classmates were "just kids."*

*By the early Eighties, we saw each other maybe once a year because we were both so busy. At the start of the AIDS epidemic, I asked him if he was worried, if he was being careful.*

*"Hey," Stephen told me over the phone, "I'm going to be the first person to get this thing and survive." Then he laughed the laugh I remembered from when we were just kids.*

*I knew he had a steady boyfriend, although only because I started hearing Tony's name on those rare occasions when we met for dinner. Tony never came, and neither did the woman I lived with for six years in Park*

*Slope. At our last dinner, Stephen told me he'd found an office on Court Street for his solo practice, mostly real estate.*

*Stein's Law says that if something cannot go on forever, it will stop. Things went bad for me in New York in a million different ways. In 1985 I moved to San Francisco, where I met Nick's mom. It never occurred to me to invite Stephen out for a visit, although I did send him "and guest" an invitation to the wedding. I never got his RSVP.*

Before I go back into the club, I walk down North 6<sup>th</sup> Street to stare at the Manhattan skyline. The weedy lot across Kent Avenue is filled with rats and garbage. If we'd gotten the 2012 Olympics, the beach volleyball competition might have been held there.

*By the time I was back in Brooklyn, a harried divorced dad living in my dead aunt's brownstone – very close to where Stephen's friend John must have lived – I couldn't find any trace of Stephen. He wasn't in the phone book, his Court Street office was gone, and I'd lost touch with our only mutual friend, Veronica Reilly. Someone told me about the online Social Security death index and I discovered that Stephen died a few months after Nick was born. In case you're wondering about Nick's middle name, his maternal grandfather was named Stephen, too. I'm not that sentimental.*

*I keep meaning to ask Kevin's parents about setting up some kind of prize or scholarship in Stephen's honor at Brooklyn Law School. I don't get around to it because there's always so much to do: my writing, Laura, the baby, accompanying Nick to punk rock shows. Or maybe it's just that I didn't really know Stephen as an attorney and think some other memorial would be more suitable.*

*I once brought it up with Laura, and she just said, "Well, you're a writer, aren't you?"*

*I thought of saying, "That's debatable," but I figure it would be just another one of my failures of the imagination.*

For me, the show at Northsix seemed to last an eternity after I went back into the club. For the boys, who knows?

Wending our way through the crowds of the terminally hip that clog Bedford Avenue after midnight, Kevin lets out a huge sigh.

"I can't believe it's four years since my first week in high school," he tells us.

"Ah, yes," I say. "Those wonderful carefree days of youth are now behind you, Kevin. I feel your pain."

"Um, my first week in school was 9/11, Mr. G. And Stuyvesant was practically next door to the twin towers. We were there like fifteen minutes when the building got evacuated."

He's right. Nick was still in middle school in Brooklyn that day.

"Sorry," I say. "I forgot. Senior moment."

Kevin needs to get back to his dorm at NYU, so I'm surprised when he doesn't get the subway at Bedford and North 7<sup>th</sup>.

"I'll walk further with you guys," he tells Nick. Mostly we do it in silence, but at one point Kevin asks me if I'm going to use anything I've seen tonight in my next work of fiction.

"Sure," I say, "but I'll just plagiarize what you write when you go home tonight and update your blog."

"You read his blog, Dad?" Nick says with real alarm.

"No," I say truthfully. "I was just joking. I didn't know he had a blog."

Kevin and Nick look at each other.

I don't know anything. I have no idea why I've been a published author since I was twenty-seven while Veronica Reilly, who had so much more talent and energy, practices ophthalmology with her partner in Westchester. The one piece of hers that ever got printed, and only because I intervened, was "The Misplaced Trout."

*I hadn't seen a play in years when Stephen dragged me to a performance of Tom Eyen's Women Behind Bars at some East Village theater around 1976. Holly Woodlawn played a locked-up hooker and Divine the prison matron. Before that, I'd only seen them in Andy Warhol and John Waters movies.*

*"That was fun," I told Stephen after the show that night. "I guess that year with Mr. Haring killed anything I felt for theater. Seeing how shitty he treated you, I'm surprised it didn't do the same for you."*

*"Beneath this faggot exterior," he said, "I'm a lot tougher than you are."*

*By then his back was completely healed and he'd been working out at the gym for years. "I know," I said. "I've seen your biceps."*

*But we both knew that wasn't what he meant.*

The Lorimer Street entrance to the L train is closed on weekends, so we've got to say good night to Kevin at the entrance on Union and Metropolitan. There's a cop on the corner, and people walking up and down the street. A few stores down there's an all-night Korean grocery and across the street is a brightly-lit 24-hour laundromat.

So am I going to look or not when they kiss? If I look, I'm not giving them their privacy. But if I don't look, they might think worse of me. I hate for people to think worse of me.

*Stephen once told me that his mother came into his bedroom while he and John were in bed. He didn't have a lock on the door. Mrs. D'Atri just said, "Hi Stephen, hi John. I just wanted to tell you I'm going to Bohack's to get some food for dinner."*

*"Wow, that was pretty cool of her," I said to Stephen.*

*"No, not at all," Stephen protested. "She didn't see anything. She wasn't pretending not to see anything. She really didn't see what was going on. Richard, people see what they want to see and no more than that."*

What I see: My son and his boyfriend kiss.

Perhaps out of deference to me, perhaps because it's what they're doing naturally, the kiss is neither incredibly deep nor incredibly long. But it's a real kiss nonetheless, with some tongue involved.

Still, it's no epiphany, just two tired teenage lovers saying goodnight.

I imagine I kiss Laura like that all the time.

## IN THE SIXTIES

In the Sixties it almost never seemed to snow. The war was always on our minds. It was nearly always spring. I failed my road test twice. When it rained there was usually thunder with it.

In the Sixties I got into herbs. In the Sixties I got into vitamins. In the Sixties I got into granola and yogurt for three months before I realized I hated how they tasted.

In the Sixties I bragged for a week about having lunch with Rennie Davis.

In the Sixties I lost my virginity to a girl I met campaigning for Gene McCarthy. At the beginning of the Sixties women were girls and girls were chicks. By the end of the Sixties girls were women and chicks were poultry.

In the Sixties I smoked dope. All my friends smoked dope. My little brother in junior high smoked dope. My shrink smoked dope. My professors smoked dope. When I lied to someone once and said I didn't smoke dope, she said, "What are you, retarded?" Even my mother smoked dope once, through a pipe, at my insistence. She claimed it made her nauseous.

I was spit upon by people who called me a commie in the Sixties. I had antiwar leaflets ripped out of my hands at subway stations in the Sixties. An old lady answered my two-fingered V-for-peace sign with a three-fingered W-for-war. Garbagemen refused to take my garbage because of my Moratorium poster.

In the Sixties I read *Soul on Ice*, *Soledad Brother*, *The Prophet*, *Steal This Book*, *The Plague*, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and *Valley of the Dolls*. I discovered Kurt Vonnegut before any of my friends did. I claimed to understand Richard Brautigan in the Sixties.

In the Sixties I turned back on the Quickway on the way to Woodstock because I couldn't stand all the traffic and all the rain.

I bleached my hair blond in the Sixties. I let it grow down to my shoulders and discovered that my grandmother liked it that way. I grew sideburns. When they grew in brown, I bleached them, too. I washed my hair with Herbal Essence twice a week in the Sixties.

Nobody I knew had muscles in the Sixties. We spent hours discussing tribbles and the meaning of the final episode of *The Prisoner*. I wore aviator glasses with tinted lenses. I went through psychoanalysis, group therapy, contract therapy, and primal therapy. I was a member of SDS.

In the Sixties all my male friends and I failed our draft physicals. Brian Epstein (no, not *that* Brian Epstein) failed because his left arm was shorter than his right. Scott Koestner failed because he smoked twenty packs of cigarettes the night before and aggravated his asthma. Alan Karpoff and Lanny Tanzer failed because they were underweight, and Elihu Stone failed because of his skin condition. Joe Cortese failed because he wouldn't take off his pants, because he threw up on the sergeant, and because he had severe nervous hiccups. Jerry Sherman failed because he said he was gay. Later he married my ex-girlfriend, and two years after that he actually did become gay. I had to go through the whole physical and then I handed the sergeant at the last station a note from my shrink saying my prognosis was guarded and the sergeant said they couldn't let a guy like me into the Army. I was classified 1-Y for a year and then they forgot about me, I thought, because I never heard from Selective Service again. Years later I found out that a woman who lived across the street from us worked as a secretary to my draft board and because her brother was friends with *my* younger brother, she "accidentally" threw

my file away.

In the Sixties I once spent a New Year's Eve tie-dyeing T-shirts, candle-dripping bottles, and cooking electric bagels.

In the Sixties I was accused of being an anti-Semite because I was quoted in our school newspaper of saying at a meeting, "I went to Hebrew school and all that shit." My parents' rabbi called me in for a talk. I told him he was a racist for supporting the teachers' strike and he shook his head sadly and said I'd learn.

In the Sixties my friends were Pisceans, Geminis, Aquariuses, Capricorns, and Leos. Especially Leos.

In the Sixties I met drug addicts. I got used to paying exact fare on buses. I was treasurer of the Mill Basin Peace Council and I wrote plays that were terrible imitations of Edward Albee. I used the expression "hairy" a lot in the Sixties.

When Martin Luther King was shot, I stayed in the house for a week out of fear and shame. When Robert Kennedy was killed, I caught a terrible cold out of guilt for working for McCarthy. In the Sixties I was afraid of construction workers, cops, someone slipping acid in my Boone's Farm Apple Wine at a party, driving at night, getting drafted, death, the future, and graduation.

I raised money for a black classmate indicted for murder. I raised money for a Chinese friend to have an abortion. I raised money for Chicano migrant workers I had never even met, or expected to meet. Most of the money I raised originally belonged to other people's parents.

In the Sixties the magazines I read were *Ramparts* and *Rolling Stone*. I subscribed to *The Village Voice*. I once answered a personal ad in *The East Village Other* but I only occasionally glanced at *Screw* or *Fuck You*.

On my nineteenth birthday my girlfriend got me a gold peace-symbol chain to wear around my neck. On



my girlfriend's eighteenth birthday I went with her to Planned Parenthood, in the same Court Street building as my draft board, and paid for four months' supply of birth control pills. A few weeks after that, she left me for another guy, someone whose politics I respected.

In the Sixties I hung out in Washington Square Park every day for an entire summer, except when I hung out at Bethesda Fountain. I got punched out by a black man whose acid I didn't want to buy. I met people from Belgium whose sex I couldn't determine, not even after two cups of cappuccino at Reggio's. I made friends with a fat girl, a speed freak named Crazy Judy, and I made friends with the four guys she lived with. She danced barefoot in the fountain and everyone said she had VD.

In the Sixties I knew a guy who was insulted by Abbie Hoffman. This was quite nearly an honor.

In the Sixties I cheered inwardly when a character used the word "uptight" on *As the World Turns*.

I listened to Dylan for eight straight hours one day. I bought coconut incense at Azuma. I fell asleep an hour before Neil Armstrong walked on the moon.

In the Sixties I once visited a commune where a sad-eyed girl in a granny dress told me the outside world was based on lies. "Lies and bullshit, bullshit and lies," she kept repeating. Her name was Enid, I think.

I chanted "Dump the Hump, Dump the Hump" in the Sixties. I chanted "Peace now, peace now" in the Sixties. I chanted "One two three four, We don't want your fucking war" in the Sixties. I could never bring myself to chant, "Hey hey, LBJ, how many babies did you kill today?"

In the Sixties I lost friends to the women's movement, to black separatism, to gay liberation, to heroin, and to the fifteen-year-old Perfect Master, Guru Maharaj Ji. Some of them I got back in the Seventies.

In the Sixties I babysat for a woman in the Seattle 8

when she jumped bail to visit her old mother in Brooklyn. The Seattle 8 were arrested for protesting the conviction of the Chicago 7. They were convicted, too. In the seventies I came across this woman's obituary in *The New York Times*. The obituary said she died of natural causes, something I found difficult to believe.

I loved *Easy Rider*, especially Jack Nicholson. I bought Roloids every morning. I made out a will. I took over a college president's office and slept there for two nights. I drank the college president's bourbon and pilfered his stationery. I was on the strike committee and helped paint a banner saying "People's U" that we hung out on the balcony. When we couldn't figure out what to do next, we ran out after hearing a rumor that the Tactical Patrol Force was being called in. They *were* being called in, but by then it was mid-May and the rest of the semester had been canceled anyway.

In the Sixties I had a pen-pal named Mansarde who liked to write about throwing Molotov cocktails through the windows of public buildings. She sent me a necklace made of shellacked watermelon seeds and I sent her a Cream record in return.

My friend Ken joined the National Guard because he didn't think he could fail his draft physical. We had a going-away party for him the Sunday he left for Fort Polk. The next day Kent State happened.

In the Sixties I used to dream about Jim Morrison and wonder if I was gay. In the Sixties my father said, "It's a bitter pill to swallow," after Humphrey lost to Nixon. In the Sixties I could do a bound lotus.

I went to a teach-in on the environment on Earth Day and actually heard a man say, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the pollution."

I wore a button that said *The People Will Free the Panther 21*.

I knew a black Vietnam veteran who wore a button

that said *Zeke Clayton, Outside Agitator Emeritus*.

I knew a guy in YAF who wore a button that said *Give War a Chance*. Everyone said he carried a handgun. At graduation he wore a hardhat with an American flag on it instead of a mortarboard.

My sixteen-year-old neighbor wanted to quit high school to fight hardhats. My twenty-year-old cousin was beaten up in Williamsburg while canvassing for a peace candidate for Congress. My six-year-old brother once said, "Postcards aren't *relevant*."

In the Sixties everyone who disagreed with us was a fascist. The war, of course, was a fascist war. ITT and Dow Chemical were fascist corporations. Israel was a fascist country even though it was Jewish. All Republicans except John Lindsay were fascists. I spelled America with a K and Nixon with a swastika.

In the Sixties it never occurred to me that I might one day become a fascist myself.

DIARY OF A  
BROOKLYN CYCLONES HOT DOG

August 22

Wonderful news! Mr. Cohen came down to the ticket office this morning and said that I can be the new Relish for the rest of the season! Since Eduardo quit because his girlfriend is pregnant, I've been pestering everyone connected with the team – Party Marty, Sandy the Seagull, the infielders, even Mr. Cohen himself – with my dream that I should be the next Relish. And now it's come true! I start in two days, when we play the Vermont Expos. I ran all the way from the Kings Highway station to get myself in training.

Grandmother was dismissive, as I expected. "What is it with this baseball?" she yells. "Is this what we came to this country for? Better you should be in school to be an eye doctor like Violetta! Baseball is not something a girl should make of her life!"

Sometimes I want to tell her that Violetta is spending most of her time with that Haitian artist in Williamsburg, but I know I cannot squeal on my sister. Besides, I think it is true love with Violetta and Fesner. I can only wish for that for myself, but I cannot think about that tonight: I have my first love, baseball!

August 23

The hot dog suit is very uncomfortable. And Eduardo left it a little sweaty. Also, the size is not quite right for me. I ask Mustard and Ketchup how they can stand it, and they say I will get used to it. Sandy the Seagull heard us talking, and he said, "You guys should be inside this and you'll know what uncomfortable is!"

But Sandy is the one true mascot, the star here. Even when the fans do not know the names of the shortstop or even the pitcher, they know Sandy with his cheerful beak, his generous outspread wings, his Cyclones jersey – just like the players wear! – and his Cyclone leggings and his Cyclones hat. The hot dogs are cute-looking, but we are not one of a kind. You can't find a Sandy the Seagull on the menu at Nathan's.

I know it is a privilege to be on the field at KeySpan Park. I was happy to be selling tickets and sometimes being an usher, but now I get to be running around on the field every night! The girls I play softball with at Marine Park are so jealous!

The only better thing that can happen to me is impossible: for me to be the shortstop like Webster from Arkansas is. This is still my happiest moment since we left Uzbekistan.

August 24

I cannot believe it was me out there tonight. In the middle of the fifth inning, as usual, the Hot Dog Race began. But tonight *I* was one of the three hot dogs, my cape of relish green blowing in the breezes. Green is now my favorite color. So much nicer, I think, than Ketchup's red or Mustard's yellow capes.

We start off at home plate as Party Marty gives us the signal and we run like the wind to the outfield. I was out of breath by the time I got there – I really need to stop smoking so much – but of course I am Relish and I'm supposed to come in last.

Mustard won tonight. But attention was thrown away from us because Sandy the Seagull slipped while he was dancing in the dugout. He was all right. Later, when I asked what happened, Mike (who is Sandy the Seagull) said, "Oh, I didn't see where I was going and fell on my good friend, Con Crete." Corey Ragsdale heard him and

laughed but I didn't think it was too funny. It's good for Corey to laugh, him with his .188 batting average, especially since he made a fielding error which cost us the game against Vermont.

Violetta says I should look to see if we can get worker's comp if I have an accident. What a timid one!

August 25

Today we got revenge and beat Vermont good. Duane pitched a four-hitter. I am getting better at running, but of course I had to finish last again. They say I need to come up with better ways to lose the Hot Dog Race, the way Eduardo did when he was Relish. James (Mustard) and Vinny (Ketchup) said I will begin to think of things to do.

August 27

We were playing the Staten Island Yankees today, and before the game I was talking with their mascot Scooter the Holy Cow, who is also a girl. She is quite pretty without her cow head. I wonder if she likes girls, too. She said she used to play softball but now doesn't have time.

I finished far behind today, but I got distracted by a young Muslim woman in a head scarf who yelled at me to come over and sign an autograph. My first time! Mr. Cohen later told me that is the kind of thing I need to do to keep losing the Hot Dog Race.

After the game (we lost, 5-4, very sad), they asked us hot dogs to pose with Scooter and Sandy and Pee Wee. Pee Wee is a smaller Seagull than Sandy, a kid who just hatched near the roller coaster and was found by Sandy before the season begun.

August 28

Fesner and Violetta took the subway to Coney Island today, just to watch me. Fesner says the Cyclones are like way down in the minor leagues, below the Triple-A and the Double-A and the This-A and That-A. He has a Dominican friend who told him that, since he doesn't know baseball. I tell him the guys on our team are good, some of them will be on the Mets someday and when that happens, I will turn on the TV and show him and laugh.

Unfortunately, Brian forgot to cover home plate tonight – something a pitcher should never do – and we lost again. The fans booed him and yelled bad words. This happened in the fourth inning, so everyone was in a bad mood by the time of the Hot Dog Race.

It is getting to be a little routine for me. I am more fit (I am down to six cigarettes a day!) but tonight I again was the losing condiment.

“Dead last!” an African American man yelled at me. “You’ve got to run your buns off next time!” People laughed, and I shrugged my shoulders – you have to exaggerate it under the costume – and people laughed some more.

On the Q train after the game, Violetta says I should consider becoming an actress, and Fesner says I could be in a Chekhov play. Because I speak Russian? I say, and he says, No, because you already have experience with The Seagull. Ha ha.

August 30

I realize that we have only a few home games left. I don't understand why it is such a short season. Mr. Cohen says that we are not the major leagues, but we are part of the Mets. Today Ed Charles and Art Shamsky from the 1969 team that won the World Series came to KeySpan Park. They posed for a picture with Sandy the Seagull and waved. I wanted to ask them questions, but they

didn't have time. Also, it is hard for people to understand me because the hot dog costume muffles my voice. I think Shamsky is Jewish, too.

Last again in the race. Today I got distracted by Claudia Cardinal, the New Jersey Cardinals mascot, who wanted to shake my hand. She is a sweet bird in the costume, but I found it is actually a man with a little beard underneath.

### September 1

Today the softball girls from Marine Park came to the game. We beat the Oneonta Tigers, 13-3. What a game! And I came in second in the Hot Dog Race. Mustard had some bad clams at Umberto's in Sheepshead Bay and vomited in his costume as he was running.

### September 2

I would have won tonight had I not pulled a hamstring just as I was about to reach where Lester, the right fielder, was standing. He was very nice to me. It is hard on the players because they do not see many girls, so I think he liked helping me off the field. They take them back and forth to their dormitory near Brooklyn Poly Tech downtown and are very strict about late hours.

I do not tell Lester I am from the girls who like softball because I feel sorry for him. Before his slump, people talked about him being sent up to Binghamton, but no more.

At home Grandmother berated me when she saw me putting a bag of frozen peas on my hamstring. How can she understand what baseball means?

### September 5

The reporter for the Canarsie Courier asked Mr. Cohen why Relish always loses the race. "He trains as much as Mustard or Ketchup," Mr. Cohen said, "but



things just don't work out for the kid. But I do believe he lives up to his name, in terms of relishing life."

Tonight it was that I just couldn't handle the heat. It was over 90 degrees. Scooter the Holy Cow from Staten Island seemed really concerned, not sure if I was acting.

### September 6

I broke poorly from the gate this afternoon, but Ketchup tripped Mustard and they got mad at each other and all of a sudden it looked like I would win. I was maybe ten strides from the outfield wall when Party Marty stopped his cha cha dance and came over and tackled me!

When I came back from Coney Island Hospital – all I had were bruised ribs – even the Batavia Muckdogs players said they were shocked.

Tomorrow is the last game, and Ketchup and Mustard are tied, with seventeen wins each.

Relish is winless.

### September 7

Sandy the Seagull said this morning that Mr. Cohen is very mad about what Party Marty did to me and thought about suspending him, but today was the last game and he didn't have the heart. And I felt well – better than well – for tonight my legs were with me. I caught Mustard and Ketchup at the wire. I think they were told to hold back because a man in a tuxedo came out and said, "I present this once-sluggish sausage with this bouquet of flowers!" As Sandy led the crowd in cheering, I ran around the bases in a victory lap. Baseball is a wonderful life. I got Scooter's phone number and a Cyclones cap for Grandmother and we beat Staten Island, 3-2.

## HEAT OF THE MOMENT

*(You'd Be So) Easy to Love:*  
*New York City, May 17, 1969, 89°*

"Oh, Mikey, I'm *schvitzing*," Titania Robinson shouts to me above the applause as we're in the wings waiting for our curtain calls. She's Far Rock High's star, our Reno Sweeney, sexpot evangelist-turned nightclub singer, and I'm Moonface Martin, pathetically inept gangster, Public Enemy Number 13.

"I see you've been talking to Meryl," I shout back as she hands me the white towel she's been wiping her off her sweat with. Meryl Goodman, onstage taking her bow now, is debutante Hope Harcourt. The reason *Anything Goes* is such a good musical for high school is that it's got a ton of juicy parts: eccentric Wall Street millionaire, foppish British lord, haughty society matron, gangster's moll, two Chinese guys, a total cast of about forty.

My Arrid stopped working in Act One, so I use Titania's towel as best I can just before I run out onstage. I like to hear the applause get louder as the audience sees me. It's our last performance, a Sunday matinee, and so steamy it's hard to believe the temperature was down in the forties on opening night three weeks ago.

My grandparents are in the audience for the second time, and I look for them as I lift my head up from a deep bow.

Brendan Reilly runs out from the other side of the stage as I recede. The audience claps like crazy for him. I'm tempted to clap, too, but hey, I'm tempted to clap when Brendan steps into the cafeteria line every morning. He's blond, cute, a great tap dancer.

*The Wave* review of the show said, “Brendan Reilly, as lovesick stockbroker stowaway Billy Crocker, strikes the ideal balance between charming and funny.” They say he’s like that in real life, too.

Of course the five copies of the paper my grandfather bought also say, “Michael Breslin (*Moonface*) keeps the audience in stitches with his comic timing and infectious grin,” so they’re not always right.

Brendan makes a sweeping gesture with his hand and the crowd goes wild as Titania takes her bow. Her family and friends from the projects are yelling out stuff I can’t quite make out in the din.

*“But the plum of them all is Titania Robinson,” The Wave* said, “who not only sings seven songs in the show but also has a pivotal role in bringing all of the subplots together. Robinson does an excellent job with the demanding part. Her powerful voice and commanding presence light up the stage in small group numbers such as ‘Friendship,’ where Reilly and Breslin also show off their vocal talents and facial expressions, as well as in company numbers such as the title song.”

Brendan stands in line next to me as Titania gets her star turn. Someone brings out this huge bouquet for her, and she blows kisses like Dinah Shore. I get to hold Brendan’s hand as the cast bows together and then lifts our arms in the air. Turning to him, I smile, but he’s looking out over the audience.

Later, when most of the cast pile into cars for burgers and hot dogs and cokes at The Big Bow-Wow on Cross Bay Boulevard – my grandfather says it’s called The Big Bow-Wow because after you eat there, you get sick as a dog – I end up in the back seat of a funky Karmann Ghia driven by Meryl Goodman’s boyfriend, who’s already in Queens College. Brendan’s in some other car.

At the restaurant, I'm disappointed when Brendan doesn't sit next to me. He's a little bit of a hypochondriac, so maybe it's my infectious smile.

Titania's on my left, and Meryl's boyfriend sits on my right. He must want to be across from Meryl, who Brendan's sitting next to. I'm across from Wilson Cheng, who got to play a Chinese guy for once. (The other Chinese guy was actually Tina Petropoulos, which made for some interesting moments in the strip poker game I got to play with them and Brendan.)

Meryl's boyfriend says it was really funny the way I emphasized the last word while wiping the sweat off my brow when Titania and Brendan and I were singing, "*When other friendships are soon forgot / Ours will still be HOT.*"

"Yeah, I added it for today's show," I say. "But actually, I *was* sweating like a pig. My makeup was melting and getting in my eyes."

"Doesn't it weird you out to wear makeup?" he asks as he lights up another cigarette.

"No, I'm weird," I tell him. "It bothered me worse to cut my hair this short."

"It'll grow back, sweetie," Titania says, patting my wrist.

A few minutes later, Meryl's boyfriend – Phil, I think his name is – takes out a snakeskin wallet and removes a long black hair from it, places it on a plate of french fries, takes it to the counter, and after some hubbub, comes back with a five-dollar bill plus *two* new plates of fries.

"I think it's so funny how he does this," Meryl says.

"Man, you got balls," Brendan tells Phil. He's admiring this?

"*Cojones*," says a gesturing Wilson Cheng, which cracks up everyone but me.

Maybe my alleged comic timing is off now, but I've had enough minorities-using-other-minorities'-language *schtick* for one day. Or I'm just pissed off by Brendan ignoring me.

A bunch of us go back to the beach afterwards. Even in Rockaway, it's still surprisingly hot. It must be awful in Manhattan tonight. We're at the block where I live, and I can see that my grandparents are still up in our apartment on the tenth floor. I sleep on the Castro convertible in the living room.

Someone comes back from 116<sup>th</sup> Street with some sixpacks. I think Meryl's boyfriend is eighteen, so it must have been him. Yeah, he's walking toward me with Meryl and Brendan.

Phil or whatever his name is offers me a beer. "No thanks," I say, shaking my head.

"Moonface, you're a lousy Irishman," he tells me.

"Mikey's not Irish, he's Jewish," Meryl tells her boyfriend.

"Oh," Phil says, "I thought Breslin, like Jimmy Breslin."

This guy really annoys me. "Breslin's a Jewish name, too."

"Are you sure?"

"Huh? *Am I sure?*" I say. "Man, I know what I am."

"Hey, take it easy. I'm Jewish too, but I drink beer."

I just walk toward the ocean. The sand, at least, is cool on my bare feet. Actually, I feel a breeze. It's definitely not so hot anymore.

Eventually I go back to the blanket where Meryl, Phil and Brendan are sitting and I take a toke of the joint they're passing around.

"At least he smokes pot," Brendan says.

"Yeah, well, my parents were killed by a drunk driver, not a stoned one."

What am I doing? My timing is *definitely* off. I should just spend my life playing a part onstage.

Meryl breaks the silence. "Everyone knows that pot actually increases your senses. It makes you drive even better, actually. Right, Philip?"

Philip nods.

"I wouldn't know, I don't drive," I say. Then I add, "Yet."

The night seems endless, and when Brendan gets up to leave, I purposely don't walk back with him.

Meryl's head is in Philip's lap. Philip nods toward Brendan's figure, receding as he walks up the boardwalk steps.

"Nice guy, Brendan," Philip says. "Too bad he's a fag."

I sit there a minute and tell them good night.

Next weekend I'll take the A train to Greenwich Village.

*The Gypsy in Me: Pamplona, July 10, 1971, 91°*

In the middle of a mob scene, I'm wondering what to do about my bloody feet when I think I hear some guy shouting, "*Rockaway!*"

I'm so homesick, I must be imagining it. I want my grandmother.

"Hey, Moonface!"

Running towards me as best he can in this bedlam is this guy who looks vaguely familiar: thin, tall, brown beard, granny glasses, greasy long hair pulled back in a greasy ponytail under the same red bandana I've got on.

"Hey," I say.

"Oh, shit," he says, looking at my feet. "Man, don't you know enough not to wear sandals? There's broken glass all over the place."

"I was only worried about the bulls," I say lamely.

"We need to get to the first aid clinic," the guy tells me. "Can you walk?"

"Yeah, I can walk," I say, kind of defensively. It's a reaction to his using the word *we*.

Then I remember who he is: Meryl Goodman's boyfriend.

"At least it's a little cooler now...but there's still mucho body heat with these crowds. You see the most amazing women here, right?"

"Right," I say.

Now I *really* place him: self-centered, kind of obnoxious, "*Too bad he's a fag.*"

I don't think I like this guy, but he's actually asking people where we can find one of the first aid stations.

As we make our way to medical help, he takes out his wineskin and offers it to me.

"Thanks, but I don't drink," I tell him.

He nods. "That's right. You told me that."

"You got a good memory," I say. "I'm really sorry, but I don't remember your name."

"Philip," he says as we try to make our way through bunches of drunken revelers. "The first thing I could think of was Rockaway, but you're Mikey, right?"

"Right."

Four hours later, he's a little drunk. We're in a bar and I'm watching him chat up some German woman. I'd sort of like to leave, thinking I'm in the way anyway, and I'm used to being on my own. I like being able to come and go as I please.

A few weeks before, when I ran into a girl from school as I was getting my mail at the American Express office in Madrid, I was really glad to see someone from home. But at the same time I was afraid she'd want to travel with me for a while. I shouldn't have worried

because she had a boyfriend waiting for her at a nearby *tapas* bar.

But I had to admit that after France and Switzerland, Spain freaked me out a lot: Franco's soldiers with their guns on every other corner. Politically active, I throw around the word *fascist* easily at school, but here I was, actually in a fascist country.

Maybe that's why I end up hanging out with Philip and Petra in Pamplona for the rest of the festival and then recuperating with them for a week more on the beach at San Sebastian.

Two weeks later, at a sidewalk café in a Bidassoa Valley town, Philip is telling Petra how Hemingway fished nearby when he suddenly stops and motions with his head and cigarette to a cute guy at a nearby table.

"See that guy," Philip tells Petra. "He's giving Mikey the eye."

"I don't know what that means, the eye," Petra says.

"He likes Mikey," Philip says.

I'm blushing, I think.

Petra laughs and says, "I think Mikey likes him, too."

Now I *know* I'm blushing.

Having gotten so many jokes about the Life cereal commercial, I just nod and grin and say, "Mikey likes everything."

The cuts on my feet healed a long time ago.

*Let's Misbehave:*

*New York City, June 30, 1978, 102°*

I'm naked when the phone rings. It's my grandfather, wondering what I'm doing in my air-conditioner-less studio apartment in the city when I could get on the subway and come out to Rockaway.



"It's cooler here, you've got the beach, and our air conditioner's no longer on the blink," my grandfather says. "Plus, Grandma's making salmon croquettes tonight."

"Philip's coming over," I tell him. "We're going to the movies."

"Is he still with that Australian girl?" my grandfather asks.

"No, they broke up. Listen, Grandpa, I can come in the morning."

"So bring Philip here tonight. Mikey, you can go to the movies here. *Grease* is playing. You still like musicals."

My creaking fan is doing absolutely no good.

"I saw it already," I say. Drops of sweat from my underarms are spotting the hardwood floor and the cover of *Your Erroneous Zones* by Dr. Wayne Dyer. "We're going to the Thalia. It's a revival house. You know, old movies? We're going to see *Scarface*."

"Ah, Paul Muni," my grandfather says as I'm staring at the New York Post headline: SCORCHER! "Mikey, you know he's Jewish?"

I laugh. "Yeah, Grandpa. Listen, I really have to go to the bathroom. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Well, Grandma and I will expect you tomorrow morning. I hope you and Philip have a good time. Oh, and Mikey, tell him I said there's more than one fish in the sea."

"Bye-bye."

Philip already knows about the plenitude of fish. A few years ago, when I was depressed over a breakup, he told me, "Boys like *him* are a dime a dozen."

I get into the bathtub, filled with cool water. It's my fourth bath since yesterday afternoon. I feel some relief.

Then I remember I wanted to listen to the new Warren Zevon album, so I get up and wrap a towel

around me. I drip all over the place as I find the record and put it on the stereo.

Back in the tub, I sink down to the sounds of *Excitable Boy*.

Examining my body stretched out in front of me, I can't believe that I have these washboard abdominals. Somehow they should belong to someone else. The gym and running have turned me into some Youth for Hitler boy in a Leni Riefenstahl film.

About five years ago, Philip made me go with him to some woman hair stylist's apartment on Central Park West because he was afraid she was going to mangle his good looks. I don't know what he expected me to do as I watched her cut his hair. He ended up making a date with her.

But on the subway ride downtown afterwards, Philip kept staring at his reflection in the train's window and saying, "It looks terrible, doesn't it?"

"No," I kept saying, "it looks fine."

All through dinner in Chinatown, he kept asking me how it *really* looked.

After the tenth time I told him his hair looked okay, I started getting annoyed.

We live only two blocks apart. It doesn't take me five minutes to get home from the time I say goodbye to Philip at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Street subway stop.

By the time I walked up to the third floor that night, I could hear my phone ringing. I rushed in to try to catch the call, thinking it might be about my audition.

It was Philip. "My hair looks horrible," he whined.

He cracks me up.

Okay, I'm vain too, but unlike Philip, I'm devious enough to try to hide it. I try extremely hard never to let anyone see me preen. Or sweat – not easy today. Or cry.

Thank God I've never had to see Philip cry. I don't think he does. Instead he smokes, tears up paper into ever-smaller little pieces, and fucks women.

I pull the drain plug so I can let some colder water in.

I think back to that blizzard we had in January, the night Philip invited himself over when my friend Janet, a high-powered theatrical agent, was here. He brought over his Scrabble set for us to play.

I always just put out the first word I think of because it's just a game to me. But Janet and Philip were each so intense about winning. They were really getting into the competition between them as my score lagged far behind.

He took her home and of course slept with her that night. And the next.

Philip is the most competitive guy I know. It's probably what makes him a good Legal Aid lawyer. I've seen him in the courtroom. His obnoxiousness actually works for him, and somehow it's the one place he can hide his insecurities. There, and with women.

By now Philip's slept with every single one of my female friends except Titania.

Not that I don't have more sexual partners than he does, but hey, I'm not straight. I'm not a slut, but when nature calls – as it tends to do at least a couple of times a week – I can play the game, put on my flannel shirt (even in this heat), tight jeans, work boots, and go to where I need to go. You won't find me at the trucks on West Street, certainly, but there are bars and the baths.

Yet I'm still only Public Enemy Number 13. Any day now, like at the end of *Anything Goes*, an FBI cable will arrive declaring me harmless, I'll get indignant, and my friends will have to console me with a big musical number.

Oh, and I've finally slept with Brendan Reilly. Talk about your letdowns. But I've just read the new

*Newsweek* article on The New Celibacy, and I think I may sign up.

The buzzer rings. Shit, he's hours early. Well, my fingers and toes are shriveling up anyway. I dry myself off, knowing I'll be covered in perspiration in a few seconds.

I buzz him up and listen to him make it up the four flights of stairs. He coughs, kind of the way my grandfather must have started coughing when he was Philip's age. It's too late for my grandfather, but I wish Philip would stop smoking.

He's breathless at my door.

"Big news," he gasps. "I'm getting married."

*Blow, Gabriel, Blow:*

*Fort Lauderdale, March 24, 1984, 88°*

I'm driving Philip to West Palm Beach airport for a night flight back to Newark. It's a pain that he couldn't go from Fort Lauderdale, near the condo I've been renting, but it's only \$75 on People Express, and they don't fly out of FLL yet.

I'm teaching an 8 a.m. class, so I'm not crazy about coming home late tonight, but on the other hand, the air conditioning in my building is still broken, and it's been an unseasonably hot day. I've gotten used to South Florida winters, but this is more like mid-May than late March.

"God, you can feel the humidity as soon as you walk off the plane," Philip had said when I picked him up at West Palm. It's a small airport, and you have to enter and exit the planes outside.

Philip's parents moved to a house in Tamarac a couple of years ago, the same year I took the job teaching

theater at the community college. Now that he's divorced, he's coming to visit them more often.

Philip thinks it's funny that I'm living down here with the *alter kockers* while my grandmother is still in Rockaway. She came down last winter after my grandfather's funeral and stayed a few weeks with me, but she's used to the apartment she's lived in for 18 years. She hangs out on the boardwalk and plays cards with the other old ladies she's known for years. Both her sisters still live in Rockaway.

As we pass the Pompano Beach rest area on the turnpike, Philip and I talk baseball. We took his father to a spring training game at Fort Lauderdale Stadium. The Mets beat the Yanks 4-1, so I was happy even if they were not.

Before the game, we saw Keith Hernandez and Ken Griffey horsing around on the field together. I guess they can be friends if Philip and I can be friends. Not that I saw him much once he got married.

After a series of sublets, he's now back in Chelsea in a one-bedroom on the same block as the GMHC office.

"I don't know what Davey Johnson thinks," I say, my eyes still on the road, "but Dwight Gooden would make *my* starting rotation."

"He's too young for you," Philip says.

Actually, I haven't slept with anyone in three months. Every morning when I shave my neck under my beard, I check to see if my lymph nodes are swollen.

"Do you mind if I turn up the A/C?" Philip asks.

"No," I say, "but it's not hot now."

"Are you kidding?"

"You get used to warm weather," I say. "It's like when I go up to New York in May when the term ends, and I walk around in a jacket while other people are walking around in tank tops and shorts. To me, any day that doesn't reach 70° is cold."

The vent is blowing really cold on me now that Philip's turned it up full blast. If I were alone, I'd probably just shut off the air conditioner and drive with the window open a crack. It's nighttime. It can't be much over 70° now.

"Hey, Philip," I say.

"Hey, Mikey," he says back.

"You remember Brendan Reilly?"

"No, who's that?"

"You met him once," I say. "Meryl and I went to high school with him. He was in the play, the lead – along with Titania. By the way, did you see her in *Dreamgirls* yet?"

"Not yet, but I hear she's not as good as the original one." So typical of Philip.

"She's fucking *great*. Anyway, you remember Brendan from the beach? You went with him to 116<sup>th</sup> for the beer."

"Vaguely," he says, looking at Mount Trashmore, the forty-foot garbage dump on the side of the road. "Good sense of humor?"

"Yeah," I say. "Well, I heard he died a few months ago. His lover threw him out, his parents wouldn't take him in, he ended up weighing something like 80 pounds."

"Jeez," he says. He's told me about the guys on his floor who are sick. Guys once strong and healthy are emaciated and using walkers, like my grandmother's old lady friends in Rockaway.

"At least if Mondale gets elected, maybe the government will do something," Philip says.

He knows I voted for Hart in the primary. We always root for different teams.

"It was all so superficial," I say, and he knows what I mean.

"I know. I want to get married again," Philip tells me, not for the first time. "And this time it'll be totally different."

I ask him if he ever talks to Robin.

"Nah," he says. "I think she's in Florida, actually. Tampa or someplace. If you're going to be a dermatologist, you might as well practice where everyone's got skin cancer."

I'm getting tired. "I liked Robin," I tell Philip.

"Mikey," he says with a snort, "you like *everyone*."

"Yeah, Titania says I have a heart too soon made glad."

"What's that from?"

"I think Robert Browning."

"Mm," he says as I pay the toll at the Okeechobee Boulevard exit. Philip doesn't reach for his wallet. "You also have skin too soon made cold."

I shrug as we're stopped at the traffic light. "Living down here," I say, "what can I tell you, my blood has gotten thin."

There's a big gibbous moon before us.

"Your blood could do worse," Philip tells me.

*You're the Top: New York City, May 25, 1991, 92°*

J.C. nudges me awake. I already am half-awake anyway, on my grandmother's side of the bed that she and my grandfather shared for fifty-five years.

"Hey, you asked me to get you up before I left," J.C. says apologetically.

"No, that's fine," I tell him.

"I want to beat the traffic, and you know, the girls get up early."

I smile. "They want to see their daddy."

J.C. nods. "Do you think I should take the Cross-Island up to the L.I.E. or the Southern State to the Meadowbrook?"

It's nice that he wants me to think I have the illusion of making some choice in how he begins his weekend.

"The Southern State, definitely," I say, playing along. I'm the homewrecker, at least in Daisy's eyes.

I don't tell J.C. about her phone calls. Sometimes she gets so upset she lapses into Spanish. I can understand about half of what she's saying, it's all wrong, by no means was I the first guy Juan Carlos slept with, but I end up just repeating how sorry I am things worked out the way they did for her.

The thing is, I am. I have no reason not to like Daisy. The reverse is not true.

I kiss J.C. at the door and then lock it behind him and stand out on the terrace and check out Shore Front Parkway, the boardwalk, the beach, the Atlantic, the sky. A triple-H holiday weekend, Al Roker said last night: hot, hazy, humid. I'd better get to the city before too long.

My grandmother went into an adult home in Woodmere last fall, after *her* last fall. She didn't break her hip or anything, but it was going to be a matter of time, and she didn't like the Haitian health care worker they'd sent to stay with her, though she seemed like a perfectly nice woman to me.

It's not a nursing home; the residents have to be mobile, able to go to the dining room for their meals. Grandma is happy there, happier than she'd been in the apartment. She had been younger than most of her friends, who – like her sisters – had died off in recent years, leaving her basically alone.

In the home in Woodmere, she has people around her all day. She's got a best friend. She's got a "boyfriend," a man who brings her Hershey's kisses. They make sure



she takes her Prozac and eats properly. She gets her hair done every week.

"It sounds pretty good to me," Philip said when I described my grandmother's life at the home.

When I visit – every other day since I'm back in New York – I usually say nothing when the nurses and attendants refer to her as my mother. When I was born, my grandmother was younger than I am now. My grandfather was just 41, the same age Philip will be when he becomes a father.

This is the first time I'll be seeing him this year.

It's not like we ever had an argument or anything. He just has his life; I have mine. We talk on the phone.

Before I leave the apartment – because of the recession, New York real estate is in the toilet, and there's no reason to sell at a rock-bottom price right now – I take the page I've torn from the *Village Voice* listings and look again at the notice:

*CHARMING CHELSEA WALKING TOUR. A tour of the historic neighborhood, including the Chelsea Hotel, the former site of the Grand Opera House and the General Theological Seminary. Sponsored by Adventures on a Shoestring. 10:30 a.m. Fee: \$5. Meet at the northeast corner of W. 23 St & 6 Ave.*

At 10:15 a.m., I'm the only one there except for the guide.

"Are you nervous?" I ask.

"Do you still get stage fright?" Philip asks. "A little nervousness gives you that edge, Mikey, you know that."

"Yep," I say. "Besides, this can't be anything like arguing before the Court of Appeals."

"Between the two of us," he says, "you know I'm the ham."

I raise my eyebrows. "I wouldn't go that far."

Lisette is still at the apartment in London Terrace. She'll meet up with us when it's over. Philip says she's

still having a little morning sickness, and besides, she's been getting Philip's New York history lectures ever since they started dating.

I try to hide my surprise that Philip has gotten a belly. On the phone he'd complained that his doctor didn't tell him that stopping smoking would make him gain so much weight, but what did he expect?

His hair is almost totally gray now, but he still wears it slightly long, and it looks good. The only gray hairs I've got are a few on my goatee.

"No one's coming," Philip wails. "It's too hot and they never should have made it Memorial Day weekend. The city is empty."

"It's early," I reassure him. "But it's good we both wore shorts."

"It's too hot, Mikey," he whines. "We're going to end up like fucking Rajiv Gandhi in his funeral pyre." The assassinated Indian prime minister was cremated yesterday.

"Hey, wasn't Sonia supposed to jump in?" I say, trying to distract him. Then an elderly couple comes by, looking like they're looking for the walking tour.

Eventually there are seven of us paying the \$5. Naturally Philip is prepared to make change.

Chelsea's even gayer than it was when I lived here. All of Philip's neighbors who've died off have been replaced, and then some. Somewhat miraculously, I'm still HIV-negative. J.C. is not.

But this walking tour is about the past, not the present or future.

Two hours later, when we meet Lissette in front of the Empire Diner, the first thing I tell her was, "Your husband was great!"

"I hope you're talking about the tour," Lissette says as she and Philip kiss.

A press secretary in the Dinkins administration, Lissette sometimes makes me feel like one of the City Hall reporters she has her little routines with. With me, it's that somehow I've repressed having the hots for Philip all these years.

Or maybe she just can't imagine anyone not finding her husband as sexy as she does.

But if I didn't think about Philip that way when he was 20, I'm definitely not going to think about him that way now that his stomach is as big as Lissette's in her third month.

When he called me with the news, Philip shouted, "We're pregnant!"

Call me old-fashioned, but I'll use the plural pronoun with *pregnant* only after I hear about men having morning sickness and labor pains.

Anyway, I play along with Lissette. "Oh, the walking tour? He was great on that, too. Oh, and we saw Deborah Harry in her garden."

"Deborah Harry was in the group Blondie," Philip explains to his wife. Lissette is Dominican, grew up in Washington Heights, and I guess that makes a difference. Or not.

Philip sometimes amazes me. He was so great with the lore of the Chelsea Hotel – one night back in the Seventies I hung out in Lance Loud's room there – and told us a story that I heard the day it happened: how he saw Sid Vicious at the visitors' room at Rikers when Philip was meeting one of his Legal Aid clients.

I've heard Philip's stories before – of Merrill and Lynch meeting at the swimming pool of the McBurney Y, of the long-gone Grand Opera House, of Tin Pan Alley and Edwin Booth playing Hamlet on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street and Chelsea's days as America's first motion-picture capital – but I liked hearing him tell them to other people. I ♥ New York, but not as much as Philip does.

It's been a while since I've been at the Empire. As we walk in, the waiter sees Philip coming and runs to get his coffee and tell the cook to get started on his Jarlsberg-cheese omelet with green peppers, no onions. I need to look at the menu, and not just for the aphorisms ("Be nice. Don't shout. Sit up straight. Whining is unattractive. Don't let your chauffeur drink.") They didn't have turkey burgers the last time I was here.

It feels so good to be in an air-conditioned space after the walking tour, and the black and chrome Art Deco glitz makes it feel even cooler. It isn't the shady oasis of the quadrangle at the General Theological Seminary where Philip had us all decompress from the tour, but I need my Diet Coke more than nature now.

Lisette has managed to accomplish the impossible: now Philip sends his food back in restaurants only if it is truly bad. He long ago gave up the strand-of-hair trick, but for years he'd send food back when it was perfectly fine. My theory was it gave Philip a sense of control otherwise lacking in his life, but of course I never told him that.

There's a lot I don't tell Philip. I've mentioned J.C., but far from everything – which is probably why Lisette is now trying to set me up with her cousin Manny the makeup artist.

I'm tired and hungry and don't feel like talking, so I nod a lot during lunch. My turkey burger is a little too rare, but that's life – or my life anyway. I take what I'm given.

At least once a year for twenty years I've heard Philip say, "Mikey likes everything."

*I Get a Kick Out of You:*

*Los Angeles, September 7, 1998, 101°*

"I can't believe Titania fired you," Philip says.

We're sitting at a café table outside the Encino Barnes & Noble because of Philip's addiction to tobacco. You'd think a guy who had a triple bypass two years ago would know better. He says he limits himself to two cigarettes a day, and he thinks Lissette doesn't know about it.

My guess is that even Justine, who's going to be seven and can read on a seventh-grade level, knows that he's still sneaking smokes. On the other hand, it's the only cheating Philip has done in his second marriage. And he did lose most of that belly.

I sip my iced coffee and shrug. "It wasn't personal," I say. "The show needed changes."

"Yeah," Philip says, "like a new star. Titania as a minister? Who could buy that? I never could figure out what denomination she was supposed to be, anyway. The only good parts are when she gets to sing."

"See?" I say. "I don't blame Titania. We're still friends. Besides, I landed on my toesies, with a gig that's probably going to be a lot better."

He takes a drag on his Marlboro and looks at the paperback of Junot Diaz's *Drown*, which he bought for me inside the bookstore. Philip's into Dominican stuff now, having recently taken Justine to Santo Domingo to see her great-grandmother.

I didn't have the heart to tell Philip I'd read the story collection over a year ago; a month from now, I want him to think he's the one who introduced me to a writer I really like.

"So, Mikey," Philip says. "*Conrad Bloom*'s going to be NBC's next *Seinfeld*?"

Wiping my forehead with the paper napkin, I shrug again. “If they give it time to catch on. I mean, it should be on Thursdays between *Friends* and *Frasier*, but the shit-for-brains at the network schedule us for Monday night.”

“You like your writing partners on this show better?” Philip asks.

“Partners? It’s like a platoon. You get us together, the place is packed like Grand Central Station. We can barely agree on a restaurant, let alone a joke.”

Philip stubs out his cigarette. “That’s what I like about my job. I’m the boss.”

I nod. “Here come de judge.”

Last year I saw him in his courtroom. It’s just Housing Court – in pro-tenant New York City, that usually means treble damages for landlords – but Philip runs a nice show.

He had one young Israeli woman who complained, among other things, that her elderly landlord once came in to her apartment unannounced and caught her coming naked from the shower.

From the bench, Philip quipped, “He took a risk; he could have gotten a heart attack.”

Not exactly a judicial temperament, but we let worse jokes get in the *Conrad Bloom* pilot.

When I saw Philip after the bypass, his first words were, “Welcome to Bedpan Alley.” Sometimes I think we need to switch jobs, but then I flatter myself that I’ve never been judgmental.

The other writers keep shooting down my Ken Starr references. I don’t think it’s funny when we have Linda Lavin as Conrad’s mother constantly talking to her dead husband, but mostly I keep quiet about it.

I did the same thing on Titania’s show and look where it got me.

Philip and his family are in California this week because Lissette's firm is doing some consulting for Gray Davis. Philip has told me what she's billing a year. I didn't realize politics paid that well.

So Lissette is now the chief breadwinner. Philip's salary, he says, barely pays for the mortgage on their weekend house in Columbia County and Justine's tuition at Fieldston.

I had no reason to stay in New York after my grandmother and J.C. died. Grandma died the best way possible – like Bea in *Queen of the Stardust Ballroom*: without much foreshadowing, Grandma simply didn't wake up one morning.

J.C. went in the opposite way. If he weren't already dead, I'd kill him for what he put me through.

It was so like J.C. not to hang on till protease inhibitors came on the scene. It didn't help that Daisy kept calling me a murderer.

Titania had wanted me to work with her for years. With friends, sometimes it's best not to get too involved. Philip is far from being my best friend, and we go months without talking or even e-mailing, but that's probably a good thing.

But at the time I was too vulnerable to resist Titania. I don't regret it. I like L.A. I like the money.

Philip's cell phone rings. We arrange to meet his wife and daughter in Santa Monica, at an Armenian restaurant I like. I assure Philip that their zucchini dolma is fantastic, the prices are reasonable, and Justine will find something on the menu she likes – probably the falafel and the garlic chicken patty. Justine likes hot dishes.

It will be a lot cooler by the beach in Santa Monica.

I haven't had contact with many kids in my life – unless you count college students – but I'm crazy about Justine.

What I don't like is when Philip talks to her in my presence and says something like, "Tell Uncle Mikey what you thought of *Cabaret*."

It makes me wince. I'm nobody's uncle, not even a monkey's.

And that's the way I like it, most of the time. Party of one.

*Friendship: Phoenix, June 6, 2004, 103°*

"How can you stand living here?" Philip says as we dangle our legs in my backyard pool.

At the "deep" end, three of my teenage neighbors, two Sikh boys and a girl, are playing with Justine. They're sweet kids, treating her like an old friend even though she's just twelve and they met her only two hours ago.

I smile and say, "It's a dry heat." That's what I was always told. It isn't true, at least not in July when the monsoon comes.

"You must be kidding," Philip says. "It's must be like hell here when it's *really* summer."

We're both wearing shirts, me a Punks for Dean T-shirt I'm embarrassed to wear anywhere else, he something that looks like a pale blue guyabera that seems suspiciously old-guy to me. He's begun to exercise again, but his stomach is still so big.

I'm about the same weight I was in college, but gravity is doing its job. A young guy I met at Oz – 35 is young to me now – said, "Wow, I can tell you once had a sixpack."

"It's already unbearable, and it's only early June," Philip says.

"You should start getting used to it," I tell him. "With global warming, this is what New York weather



will be like in 2050. We'll be in our late 90s and the daily temperatures will be higher than our ages."

He nods, splashes his hand in the water. We're both slathered with Kiehl's Vital Sun Protection Sunscreen. Philip had wanted to know what the PDF number was, and I told him he was getting senile, PDF was for Adobe Acrobat documents, SPF was sunscreen protection factor.

As someone who's had two basal cell carcinomas removed from his legs, I wouldn't use anything less than 40. I always hated it when my grandmother would tell me to wear a hat on the beach, and now I've got a D-Backs baseball cap on my head. I can't believe I still have to wear it backwards.

"You know, I've got my one-year checkup coming up in August," he says, his voice low so Justine won't hear. The kids are oblivious anyway, laughing and playing.

"Well, I'll see you before that," I say. "I'll be in town after the Fourth. Hey, you like interesting stuff. Are you interested in going to the Siren Festival in Coney Island?"

Philip coughs, still a little hollow. "You mean the Mermaid Festival."

"No, that's the Mermaid Parade, I think," I tell him. "The Siren Festival is music. Like that CD I was playing for you in the car. Death Cab for Cutie, Mission of Burma, TV on the Radio."

Philip just nods. In the car, when I said he should listen to some new music, he got defensive and said he loved Norah Jones. Besides, he said, Justine listens to Seventies bands.

"Lisette got us tickets for that anti-Bush concert during the convention, the one at the Apollo," Philip tells me. "You know Titania will be there."

I smile. "We finally turned that girl political. I saw her new grandson the last time I was in L.A."

Now Philip nods. This means he isn't listening.

"I keep getting these nightmares that I'm told the cancer is back," he says.

"You got a very good report on your six-month checkup," I remind him. "They got it when it was really itsy-bitsy." It first showed up as a very small spot on his chest x-ray at his cardiologist's.

Philip laughs. "*Itsy-bitsy*... Mikey, you're so weird," he tells me, for about the zillionth time.

We watch the kids for a while. When Sukhdev suggests they go for a hike on Squaw Peak in a couple of hours, Navdeep says, "Dude, your patka's tied too tight, it's way too hot."

It's actually Piestawa Peak now, named after a 23-year-old Hopi woman soldier who died in Iraq. But even the kids still call it by its old offensive-to-Native-Americans name.

The boys are about 16. Sukhdev's beard is coming in in brown patches but Navdeep barely has a mustache.

I didn't shave regularly till I was 19. When he was 22, Philip believed his beard and ponytail were growing so fast because he had sex nearly every day.

Jasminder Kaur just shakes her head. She's already beautiful but she doesn't know it yet. She whispers something in Justine's ear, and Justine laughs. I imagine it's about the boys.

Philip tells me about Lissette *hocking* him to take up golf. That's how she interacts with a lot of her clients, and Philip says she wants "a beard" to play with her. He looked up this golf weekend at a Catskills resort she wanted them to go to, and it was \$600 for just two nights. I wouldn't think that was a lot for Philip and Lissette, but he's always watched his money a lot better than I ever did.

He goes on eBay but refuses to spend more than \$20 on any item. His current goal is to buy up one copy of

every one of the twenty or so New York City newspapers published in the 1800s. I remind him there were seven daily papers even back when we were kids.

"How many papers do you have in Phoenix?" he asks me.

"Just the *Arizona Republic*," I say.

He snorts. "How can you live here? It's so ugly. And so fucking hot. After what you are used to?"

"I subscribe to the *Times*," I say with a shrug.

"Tomorrow we'll drive up to Sedona. That's beautiful. And it'll be cooler, too."

Philip smiles. "You remember Pamplona?"

"Yeah," I say.

"Don't say, 'We were so young,'" he warns me.

"I wouldn't. I'd get voted off the island. Besides," I say, switching TV-show references, "I'm with Uncle Junior: there's plenty I'd like to forget."

Philip laughs and says, "I'll bet."

Philip *doesn't* say, "You and me both." Because we're different.

He tells me I should sell my collection of autographed *Playbills*. I've got no heir to leave the *Playbills* to, what am I holding on to them for, I can make ten grand on eBay and use the money to do something now while I'm still healthy.

"Life is short, Michael," Philip says.

Justine is sitting on Navdeep's shoulders and Jasminder is on Sukhdev's, and they're playing, pretending to fight, giggling like crazy. The Sikh kids' steel bangles are glinting in the sun. I look at their adolescent bodies and think clinically.

The boys will graduate from their patkas and turn into bushy-bearded men in turbans. If she stays out in the Arizona sun long enough, Jasminder's smooth skin will end up like my grandmother's.

Before the year is out, Justine – that tiny coffee-complexioned infant I first saw with the other preemies at St. Vincent's Hospital – will be having her bat mitzvah. They had to find a synagogue that recognizes patrilineal descent.

Her father jokes that their Park Avenue *shul* is so Reformed that the rabbi's a Nazi.

A former comedy writer, I know he stole that line from Woody Allen. But I won't call him on it.

I think I hear Philip repeat himself: "Life is short." He talks like that since last year.

I nod. The desert sun keeps beating down on us. "Everything goes," I tell my unlikely friend.

## MOHAMMAD'S THERAPY MONKEY

I didn't have a choice about which college to attend because my grandfather forced me to go to his alma mater. Grandpa's been running my life ever since I can remember, and he sent me to A&T because I was acting too white. That actually meant I was acting too gay. Although Grandpa ran with the Panthers back in the day – that's how I ended up being named Huey – I guess he didn't know or care about Bayard Rustin or James Baldwin and figured a historically black university would somehow unqueer me.

I had made sure the housing people knew I was gay so I didn't get bashed like at Morehouse when a kid was beaten within an inch of his life by another guy with a baseball bat after the guy thought the alleged fag was looking at him funny in the shower. The alleged fag claimed he didn't have his glasses on and merely thought BatBoy was his roommate. Whatever.

Anyway, my first preference would have been a girl, but the school was not into co-ed roommates. So I told them to make sure I got a guy who was cool with my sexuality. And that's how I ended up with a Pakistani and his pet squirrel monkey.

Mohammad didn't mind that I was gay except he was concerned I couldn't resist being attracted to him.

"I'm so handsome," he said that first day. "What are you going to do when I take off my shirt?" Which was really funny because not only was Mohammad pock-marked with stringy hair, he had about the scrawniest, creepiest body I'd ever seen on someone my age. I'd call myself only semi-muscular, but Mohammad actually had a concave chest.

“Trust me, I’m not attracted to you,” I told him. He just laughed that annoying laugh of his.

And then there was his monkey, Herb-T, which had a cage but spent most of its time outside it, jumping from bookcase to bed to floor like our tiny room was his private jungle. At first I couldn’t figure out how the school would let him keep a pet in the dorm – why did I have to leave my cat back home then? – but it turned out Herb-T was a therapy monkey.

It was fun to call Grandpa and say my roommate was named Mohammad. I waited a beat, letting him happily imagine Mohammad was a straight-edge member of the Nation of Islam before I broke the news that not only was the guy not even African American but that I was also sleeping in the same room as a squirrel monkey.

Listening to Grandpa sputter – when he referred to Mohammad as an Arab, I corrected him – and say he was going to call the school and threaten to sic Aunt Aisha’s law firm on them if they didn’t change my room, I basically decided I didn’t mind my roommate situation.

And when Aunt Aisha confirmed what the dean had told Grandpa – that under a law passed by the state legislature, therapy pets were given the same status of service animals like guide dogs for the blind, so there was nothing they could do about it – I felt really happy that there were some things about my life Grandpa couldn’t control, even at his beloved alma mater.

As a state school, A&T was under pressure to achieve some diversity, so they heavily recruited white, Hispanic and Asian students. Very few applied, and most of them that did had really shitty grades and SAT scores like Mohammad. This was the only college he could get into where they’d let him keep his therapy monkey.

Of course I wanted to know what was up with the monkey, and Mohammad explained that as a Muslim kid going to high school in mostly Jewish Great Neck, he was

ostracized and bullied and got depressed and anxious. Instead of Prozac, his psychiatrist prescribed Herb-T to be his companion, to cheer him up and keep him calm.

It didn't really sound kosher – or halal – to me, especially when I found out the shrink, Dr. Rizvi, turned out to be a cousin of his mom's. But Herb-T won me over, entertaining me with his acrobatics and so clearly craving my attention and affection.

I was kind of depressed and anxious myself, being in a not particularly gay-friendly environment. So when Mohammad was in class and I was in the room, it was nice to have Herb-T running around.

It was kind of freaky when he exhibited some weird behavior – Mohammad explained that male squirrel monkeys use penile displays to maintain dominance – but the little guy maybe weighed two pounds and stood a little less than a foot tall, and he was kind of, well, lovable.

Besides, it wasn't long before word of the monkey lured a lot of the other students to hang out in our room. And I guess I preferred being known as the guy who roomed with the Arab and his monkey – people are so ignorant – to being known as the faggot. There was no other “out” male student who lived on campus, though I was pretty sure some guys in my classes – including one dreamy basketball player – were on the D.L.

It was mostly the girls who made a big fuss over the monkey, squealing with almost as much delight as Herb-T when Mohammad let them feed him Purina Monkey Chow or artichoke leaves and red bell peppers. Some girls didn't even mind looking at Herb-T's favorite treats, mealworms and grasshoppers.

And soon enough, I began getting evicted from the room when Mohammad and some girl wanted to be alone. I'd come back and find a little “Do Not Disturb”

sign on the door handle, one Mohammad had probably gotten from some creepy Patel motel.

For such a homely guy, he managed to have an incredibly active sex life – especially considering all around us were dozens of totally fine black guys who didn't seem to do half as well with women.

I couldn't understand it, but then I'm not heterosexual and I'm not female, despite the way I hold my books and cross my legs.

The attraction was probably the monkey, not Mohammad, but damn, my roommate seemed to be the most popular freshman on campus – at least with the girls. One night after Herb-T had fallen asleep in his cage, I asked Mohammad if he didn't feel strange because nearly everyone he was in contact with was black.

His response was to come over and put his arm next to mine. "My skin is darker than yours," he said. "And I don't have freckles and my last name isn't O'Hara like the slave owner in *Gone With the Wind*."

I started to rehearse what was going to be a long argument but he interrupted me with the verbal equivalent of a punch in the stomach: "And I'm not gay, either."

"No, you're just an asshole," was the first thing I could think of to say.

"Hey, you know I'm not homophobic at all. I'm just stating that a lot of people around here are. Just like South Asians are homophobic. But you know, Huey, you've got this attitude that turns people off."

I was too pissed to respond. Instead I went over to the stereo and put on Jay-Z and Panjabi MC's "Beware of the Boys." I was so angry that I could barely fall asleep that night, and when I woke up in the morning I was still furious with Mohammad.



So when some jocks came over to me after Biology lab and asked if I'd be willing to poison Mohammad's monkey, I told them I'd do it.

These guys were jealous of him because of all the attention he got from the girls. Also, they said they were worried that Mohammad could be a terrorist. And even if he wasn't, he didn't belong here – "Not like us, Huey," one of them said, and it surprised me because none of these guys had ever called me by name before.

They asked me to hang with them in the student union that afternoon. When they left, they either shook my hand or squeezed my shoulder. And one of them, this tall guy with glasses and a sweet goatee, came back after that and said to me in a low voice, "I'll make sure you've got what you need. Later."

He was one of the guys I thought might be on the D.L. but he also could have been talking about the monkey poison.

I couldn't concentrate in my next class, which was English. For one thing, we were going over a sonnet by Shakespeare, and that language is hard enough to get through even when you're not consumed with anger and excitement and not sure who you were angry at and what you were excited about. So after "*Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments*," I was totally lost in my own thoughts. I even imagined I heard the teacher say the word *gay* when he was talking about the poem.

I was tired and didn't feel like eating lunch, so I went back to the dorm to lie down and listen to music. When I reached for my CD of *The Bodyguard* soundtrack, it felt sticky and disgusting. Herb-T came over, shrieking, and I knew he had peed on my albums. Fuck! The smell was nauseating.

"You ruin everything!" I yelled at the monkey.  
 "This is my territory, not yours!"

And then I grabbed him and threw him halfway across the room. Not looking to see if I'd killed him, I stomped over to his cage, unzipped my jeans and peed all over it.

By then I was pretty much crazed, and I sank to my knees and started bawling. I hated everyone at A&T from Mohammad to all the stupid girls who hung around him to the creepy jocks who were turning me into an insane criminal. I hated my grandfather for not accepting me and getting me into this fucking situation.

I was sobbing so much, it took me a while to feel the monkey rubbing my back and a little longer to feel glad I hadn't harmed him. After he'd rubbed my back for a long time, urine on a Whitney Houston CD didn't seem like much harm to me, either. Bobby Brown would have understood.

So I didn't go to the student union that afternoon. When he came back from lunch, Mohammad never noticed the difference between the smell of my pee and of Herb-T's.

And of course I would never poison a therapy monkey – especially one that in the spring semester of my freshman year at A&T would get Derek Johnson to come out to me one afternoon when he was watching Herb-T open a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup with his cute little hands.

Derek Johnson has cute hands, too. Sometimes Derek Johnson's hands put the Patel motel "Do Not Disturb" sign on my dorm room's outside door handle, and when Mohammad comes, he has to hang out elsewhere till we take it off.

For a change, I'm the one who gets to be alone with someone in our room. Of course the squirrel monkey's always around. But he's not the only one who can use penile displays to show dominance.

## SEVEN SITCOMS

*Beulah*

My ex-boyfriend Warren once asked me about the first TV program I could remember watching. I told him it was reruns of this show, which originally ran on CBS from 1950-53. I'd sit in the basement while our maid, Carolyn, was doing ironing and I'd help her fold the clothes and put them in the laundry basket as we watched *Beulah*. The show starred the legendary Ethel Waters, whom my grandparents had seen on Broadway in *Blackbirds of 1929* just a week before they got married.

Beulah was, of course, a maid, as was her idiotic friend Oriole, played by Butterfly McQueen, who had the shrillest voice I'd ever heard. The bland white family Beulah worked for looked to her to solve their problems, some of which Beulah herself had gotten them into because of her big heart.

When Beulah yelled at little Donnie Henderson for tracking mud into her kitchen after she'd just cleaned it, Carolyn would point a finger at me and said, "She should have hit that boy for messing up her floor," and I would remind myself to watch where I walked.

What puzzled me about the show was that the actors kept changing while their characters remained the same. Beulah had three different lazy boyfriends named Bill – one of them was that "Play it again, Sam" guy – and eventually another actress besides Ethel Waters started playing Beulah, and there was a second and even more moronic Oriole, too.

I asked Carolyn what was going on, and she said maybe they figured that viewers were too stupid to notice that the Negroes were different people all the time. But

this didn't explain why the white mother, father, and son were played by two different sets of actors, too. I didn't know the actors kept quitting because they didn't want to be on a show with racist stereotypes.

Eventually, pressure from the NAACP got the *Beulah* reruns taken off the air. Soon after that, I started watching a pale nighttime imitation of the same show called *Hazel*, with Shirley Booth, a white woman, as the maid character. I didn't like it as much because you always knew the same actor would be playing the same part every time.

Warren said he'd never heard of *Beulah* or *Hazel*. If they'd been any good, he said, they would have played on TV Land or Nick at Nite.

### *The Stu Erwin Show*

Although this show was originally broadcast from 1950-55, I used to watch its reruns at 6:30 every morning on WNBC, channel 4 in New York. Stu Erwin was a nondescript schlemiel who played the movie roles that Tom Ewell wouldn't take, and here he was the harried husband and father of two daughters.

Even though Stu was a high school principal, he seemed lost when he tried to deal with family problems, so they kept calling family council meetings to discuss things. Stu was vice-president of the council, and his wife, as president, ran the meetings.

Actually, the situations these characters got into were pretty boring, and the only reason I watched was because of the younger daughter. Although she was only like nine years old, she was the smartest and funniest one, with a weird attitude. Like when her older sister protested, "Rodney is not my boyfriend," the little girl replied,

“Well, he isn’t your girlfriend.” I thought that was hilarious.

This little girl was never going to take shit from anyone. The actress playing her, Sheila James, went on to portray the homely but irrepressible Zelda Gilroy on *Dobie Gillis* and then became Sheila Kuehl, the lesbian activist and the best actor ever to serve in California state elective office, and I’m counting Reagan and Schwarzenegger.

She must have learned how to be a state senator from Stu Erwin’s family council meetings.

I don’t know how she learned to be gay, but she taught me plenty.

### *December Bride*

On my first trip to downtown Hollywood, I was appalled by its scuzziness till I came across the sidewalk star for Spring Byington, who played the leading role in this show. I stood there staring at it for a while, long enough for Warren to get annoyed. He thought Spring Byington had been a jazz musician. There was a big age difference between Warren and me.

Originally shown on CBS from 1954-59, *December Bride* was about Ruth, an elderly widow who moved in with her daughter and son-in-law in Southern California. They liked her but kept trying to find her a boyfriend and potential second husband. I could never figure out why it mattered because Ruth seemed perfectly happy to be single and so did her old friend Hilda.

Actually, my favorite character on the show was Gladys, the monstrous wife of the family’s next-door neighbor Pete Porter. Pete would come over and always talk about how horrible Gladys was, and you could only imagine this because Gladys never appeared on the show.

Gladys may have been the first unseen sitcom spouse, a device later used by *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (Pickles), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Lars), *Cheers* (Vera), and *Frasier* (Maris).

After *December Bride* went off the air – I can’t remember if Ruth ever did remarry, but I don’t think it mattered – CBS put on a spinoff show called *Pete and Gladys*, which featured Harry Morgan in his old role as Pete and the perfectly normal-looking and -acting Cara Williams as Gladys. What a letdown.

### *Hank*

This one-season NBC show presented what I assumed was a great problem in American academia circa 1964 – namely, college “drop-ins.” Hank was an ambitious 18-year-old orphan who supported his kid sister by selling hot dogs from a cart just outside the gates of an ivy-covered campus.

Unable to afford tuition in the days before Pell grants and Stafford loans, Hank resolved to attain his higher education by dropping in to classes in various disguises, which were invariably humorous. His nemesis was the college registrar, who kept telling his flunky assistant that by God, he was determined to weed out all these “drop-in” students, not knowing that Hank, his daughter’s girlfriend – I mean boyfriend – was the only “drop-in” on campus.

The one confusing thing about this show was the theme song, which ended with the lyrics, “*He’ll get his degree / His Phi Beta key / That’s Hank.*” I wondered how he could get a diploma, let alone make Phi Beta Kappa, without actually registering under his own name.

I wasn’t an orphan, but this show made me glad I was aiming to get my Phi Beta key at the tuition-free City

University of New York. I did get it, too, but a year after I graduated, because my GPA only went over 3.5 when I got A's in Dostoevsky in Translation, Classical Mythology, and Early Afro-American Literature my last semester and it was too late to include me at commencement.

Carolyn read all my books from Afro-American Lit, from Olaudah Equiano's slave narrative and *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* to *The House Behind the Cedars* and *The Souls of Black Folk*, but she wouldn't come with me to class. "Everyone would notice I'm not a student," she said. Even though I offered, I knew she wouldn't go, relieving me of the embarrassment of anyone knowing my family had a black maid.

But I was more like Hank than Carolyn was because after I graduated, I spent an entire semester pretending to be a student in the Columbia University anthropology class of Margaret Mead. Wearing a tartan outfit, leaning on her gnarled walking stick, she would make a grand entrance into the auditorium.

One day Margaret Mead talked about how we imagine things and said that because in English, adjectives come before verbs, when we hear "white horse," we first see the "white" and then the "horse." But in French or Spanish, they saw the "horse" before they saw the "white."

### *The People's Choice*

What I liked best about this show was the secret running commentary on the goings-on by a basset hound named Cleo. The characters on the show seemed oblivious to the dog, whose voice was that of Mary Jane Croft, one of those classic sitcom actresses you'd know if you saw her. She usually played a ditsy blonde housewife

and was often seen as Lucille Ball's friend in Lucy's various shows. Mary Jane Croft appeared on many programs, including *I Married Joan* and *Our Miss Brooks*, and she was even one of the actresses who played the white Mrs. Henderson on *Beulah*.

The star of the show, the former child actor and soon-to-be Hollywood producer-mogul Jackie Cooper, played Socrates "Sock" Miller, an ornithologist who lived in a trailer park on the outskirts of New City. Elected to the city council after a write-in campaign, Sock was in love with Mandy, daughter of the town's rotund, blustery Mayor Peoples, who eventually marries Sock's salt-of-the-earth Aunt Gus.

Every show seemed to revolve around a case of mistaken identity or some misunderstanding. The plots were pretty stupid, but I liked how Cleo would drolly remark how idiotic the people were acting. For a while, Sock and Mandy were secretly married and they had to hide this from her father, who would do stuff like fix Mandy up with a rich potential boyfriend or ask Sock to escort a beauty queen to a political dinner.

*The People's Choice* was one of the first sitcoms I watched at night, during the summer before kindergarten, when I was living with Grandpa Herb and Grandma Ethel in their bungalow on the beach. Grandpa Herb told me how Jackie Cooper had once been the cutest child in movies and even made him cry at the end of the movie *The Champ*.

During the school year, it was on past my bedtime, at Thursdays at 9 p.m. The only time Mom said I could stay up to watch it was the night before Columbus Day, when there was no school. But that was the one night it was pre-empted by a speech by Adlai Stevenson.

At the time, I was the only five-year-old in P.S. 244 who wore a Stevenson/Kefauver button with the candidates' photos on it on the Mickey Mouse sweater



my great-grandmother – Grandpa Herb’s mother – bought for me. Still, even I would have preferred to see the fake politicians on *The People’s Choice* that night.

Besides the dog, my favorite character on the show was Rollo, a freeloading friend who mooched off Sock and Mandy even after their marriage was revealed and they moved to a brand-new housing development called Barkerville, where Sock was in charge of sales. The program got pretty bad by that point – his boss J.B. Barker wasn’t as good a foil as Mayor Peoples – but I kept watching it.

Eventually this was on mornings, right before *December Bride*.

### *Topper*

Leo G. Carroll played Cosmo Topper, an uptight banker who seemed to be about thirty years behind the times, even when this show was first broadcast, from 1950-53. I used to watch the daytime reruns on channel 5, WNEW-TV.

Topper wore spats and carried an elegant walking stick – or at least that’s how I remember him. A total stiff-upper-lip Englishman, Carroll had the biggest space between his mouth and his nose that I have ever seen on a human being.

Topper’s life changes when he moves into a new house haunted by its previous owners, the jet-setting socialites George and Marion Kirby, who were killed in an avalanche on a skiing trip to Switzerland. Neil, the St. Bernard who tried to rescue them, also died and came back as a ghost-dog with a drinking problem.

The Kirbys always seemed to have cocktails in their ghostly hands while trying to loosen Topper up and get him to have fun. Nobody could see George and Marion –

played by the real-life married couple Robert Sterling and Anne Jeffreys – except Topper, so he ended up doing crazy things.

Everyone – his wife, his boss, his white maid and cook – thought Topper was insane. I could relate to that. When I started wearing an ascot, people in the neighborhood thought the same thing about me.

At Carolyn's funeral, I went up to her sister to offer my condolences. She said to me, "You don't look as crazy as I expected."

### *Amos 'n' Andy*

Warren's grandfather, a Baltimore lawyer active in the NAACP, campaigned to get the reruns of this show taken off the air. But Warren's grandmother said he actually thought *Amos 'n' Andy* was pretty funny, and he didn't even mind the portrayal of the sneaky lawyer, Algonquin J. Calhoun. My favorite line from the show came when Calhoun is attacked for doing something underhanded and declaims, "I resent the allegation and I resent the alligator."

This was another show I would watch during the day, years after its initial 1951-53 run. Carolyn sometimes watched it with me, but I can't remember if she found it offensive. My friends and I used to imitate the characters – "Holy mackerel there, Sapphire!" and "Do the name Ruby Begonia ring a bell?" – but I knew enough never to do that in front of Carolyn.

*Amos 'n' Andy* made Harlem look like an interesting place, so I pestered my parents to take me there. They never did, even though I told them about a restaurant I'd heard about called Grayson's Soul Food City. Carolyn's family all lived in Brooklyn, so she wouldn't take me, either.

But when I was out on my own for the first time – sharing an apartment with two other gay guys on Amsterdam and 119th – I was thrilled to get a letter from my Congressman, Charles Rangel, with the salutation, “Dear Harlem Resident.”

What really tickled my funny bone about *Amos ‘n’ Andy* was that its main character was Kingfish, the scheming braggart played by the incomparable Tim Moore. Amos, the sensible cab driver, may have gotten first billing, but four or five shows would go by before he would appear, usually for just a couple of minutes to straighten everything out.

Andy didn’t get all that much screen time, either, and when he did, I found myself waiting for this naïve boob to get lost. I wanted to see Kingfish, his wife Sapphire, her horrible “Mama,” attorney Calhoun, the moronic janitor Lightnin’, the old maid Gribble sisters or even the one-episode characters like the judge, the doctor, or the rich socialites, who I think were named the Van Pelts.

All these characters were each a thousand times more interesting than Amos and Andy, so why was the show named for them? My grandfather said it was because on radio the white men who created the show played them. But that didn’t explain it, because CBS could have just changed the title to *Kingfish* when it came on TV.

“It would be like if *I Love Lucy* were called *Fred and Ethel*,” I told Grandpa Herb.

“I’d like that,” he said, and I knew he meant because my grandmother’s name was Ethel – like the actress Ethel Waters whom they’d seen on Broadway a week before their wedding.

Warren didn’t know who Ethel Waters was. During his childhood, he watched Diahann Carroll in *Julia*, which was the next show after *Beulah* to star a black woman, and Warren liked it a lot.

I was seventeen when *Julia* first appeared on NBC, and I couldn't stand it and had no use for any of the white characters like the crusty old doctor, the daffy neighbor, and her freckled little boy, Earl J. Wagerdorn.

The only episode of *Julia* that I found even mildly interesting featured Jim Brown, the football player, who didn't have his shirt on as the doctor examined him. The white nurse nudged Julia, and pointing to the patient's muscular torso, made a remark about Black Power.

Last April, on the plane to Amsterdam for Warren's wedding to Piet, Warren's grandmother turned to me and asked why he and I had broken up seven years before.

"*Beulah* and *Julia*," I told her, wishing KLM had a laugh track.

## VAMPIRES OF NORTHWEST ARKANSAS

My friend Cindy was bitten by a bat one night while we were walking back to her place. It was a week after I arrived in Eureka Springs to visit her. I'd had a bad feeling about the shortcut through the woods, but then I've lived nearly all of my life in New York City.

"It's perfectly safe," Cindy said as she guided me on the path. I wanted to stay on the streets, but Cindy said we could save ten minutes. Ten minutes really didn't matter to me that Friday night.

It was September 14, 2001, and once I had I managed to find out that none of my friends or relatives were in the World Trade Center on Tuesday, that only some friends of friends were missing, I was happy to stay safe in Eureka forever.

Planes were grounded, so it looked like I might have to be there for a while. I stopped wearing my wristwatch.

"Shouldn't we have flashlights?" I asked her as we made our way through the trees. "I can't see a thing."

"I've done this hundreds of times," Cindy assured me. Just as she said it, I was able to see something. I thought it was a bird, but I didn't have time to get scared. I have a phobia about birds ever since I was dive-bombed by grackles as a kid on vacation in Texas.

Cindy screamed. So I screamed. She knew it was a bat right away. It got her just above her nose.

We scrambled back to Spring Street and knocked on the door of the nearest house. Cindy was holding her forehead but she said it didn't really hurt. The only one home was an out-of-breath high school boy who came to the door in just an undershirt and gym shorts.

At first I thought we'd interrupted him and his girlfriend, but as he drove us in his pickup truck to the ER

at Eureka Springs Hospital, he told us he'd only been doing bench presses. His name was Duane. He and Cindy knew each other by sight, but not by name.

I don't know what I was expecting, but this hospital seemed more like a big doctor's office, and there weren't too many people around, and it took about an hour before we found out there were no rabies vaccines in Eureka. They were going to have to send for some from Little Rock.

Little Rock? I couldn't believe it. This was what our country had come to. No wonder we were attacked like that. And for a minute, I flashed on what the view from my rooftop in Brooklyn would look like when I turned toward lower Manhattan. If I ever got home, I guess I'd find out.

Not only were they getting the rabies vaccine from Little Rock, but it was going to be delivered to the hospital in Harrison. Why Harrison? We couldn't get a straight answer from the doctors. The nurses were just plain rude, like it was Cindy's fault for getting bitten by a bat. One fat nurse made a remark about vampires. Even Duane, who was probably only 16, gave her a look.

They told us the vaccine would get to Harrison by about 3 o'clock the next day. Cindy doesn't have a car, but Duane said he wouldn't mind driving us. He was a sweet kid.

"Does it hurt?" I asked Cindy at her place, when we were getting ready to go to bed.

"Like a bee sting, kind of," she said. "But I feel sick to my stomach."

"That's just nerves," I said. "Take a Xanax. You know I never travel without my portable pharmacy." Cindy and I share a long-ago drug history.

"I feel I'm different somehow," Cindy said. "That something in my body has changed."

“You’re not a vampire,” I told her. “Hey, chances are that bat wasn’t rabid at all. The shot is just for insurance.”

She didn’t want to call her daughter in Branson. She really didn’t want to tell anyone about it. Like it was somehow shameful.

I’ve known Cindy for over thirty years, so I know she can be like that. You don’t want to know what her childhood had been like. Well, it was like mine, actually.

I met her when I was working Times Square. She’d practically just come off the bus at Port Authority and was so country I figured she could use a friend. I think I was the first gay boy she’d ever met.

Anyway, that was as long ago as the Punic Wars, and I don’t think about those days very much. Times Square is now as safe for tourists as downtown Eureka Springs is. I work as a proofreader at a law firm.

The next afternoon, when we got to Duane’s house, he was having a fight with his sister, who was the true owner of the pickup truck. As we were leaving, she was saying something bitchy and Duane just yelled back, “Oh, bite me, Lorelei.”

I started giggling and Duane gave me a curious look. Cindy explained the joke.

“I’d need *ten* rabies shots if she was to actually bite me,” Duane told us as we lurched along Main Street. I didn’t like the way he drove.

On the way to Harrison, Duane asked me a lot about New York. I didn’t really want to talk about it, so I answered his questions in a perfunctory way and kept asking him about his life.

He said the attacks made him think about joining the marines but his sister had told him he’d be crazy to enlist.

Cindy was quiet, and I knew she was worried about the vaccine. I’d told her that you no longer had to get the shots in your stomach, that it probably was nothing more

than a flu shot, but I really had nothing to go on when I said that.

It turned out to be about the truth. The doctors and nurses in the Harrison hospital were less snotty than the ones in Eureka. There'd have to be follow-up visits, but they were sure she'd be fine.

We wanted to take Duane out to dinner to thank him for everything but were afraid he wouldn't want to be with a couple of old people on a Saturday night. He said he had nothing better to do, and we went to a steakhouse out on that road near where the Passion Play is.

Every time I've come to Eureka Springs, I've always liked seeing the Christ of the Ozarks. If you look at him with his arms outstretched like that, you can see right away that his proportions aren't normal. Cindy once told me they had to make him a lot stubbier than a real man, a real Jesus, would be because if he was normally proportioned, he'd be so high that airplanes would crash into him. The people who built the statue didn't want to have to put a flashing red light on top of his head.

I'd forgotten how 16-year-old boys could eat. I try to limit my red meat these days. Of course back when I was 16 on the Deuce and I found a generous man who'd take me to Howard Johnson's or Hector's Cafeteria or Lindy's, I'd stuff my face as much as I could because I didn't know when I'd eat so good again.

"So I guess you're not going to become a vampire," Duane told Cindy while we were having dessert. Actually, it was just him; Cindy and I were settling for coffee.

She looked very tired. I'd seen her look that tired too many times over the years we've been friends.

"Oh, you never know, Duane," Cindy told the boy. "I never expected to be somebody's grandmother either, and yet here I am."



Duane said Cindy didn't look like anyone's grandmother he knew. Then he turned to me.

"You neither," he said. And he gave me a funny sort of smile.

BRANCH LIBRARIES OF  
SOUTHEASTERN BROOKLYN

*Rugby*

I was three when Dad held my hand as we walked into this branch, a storefront on Utica Avenue near Snyder, four blocks from our apartment. He went to the desk and said to the librarian, "He wants to get a library card."

The librarian was not amused. "Son," she said, "take your baby brother and get out of here. I'm not in the mood for jokes today."

I didn't understand. Nobody had told a joke.

"He's my son," Dad said. In his early twenties, Dad probably could pass for sixteen the way I would be able to. "And he wants to get a library card."

The librarian frowned. "He has to be able to write his name in order to get one."

"I can write my name," I said.

"He can," my father said.

The librarian gave us the piece of paper that had the form to fill out and a little round pencil, not like the bigger hexagon-shaped ones with erasers that I was used to.

I put my tongue at the right corner of my mouth and wrote my name as best I could. I misjudged the amount of space I had, and my first name was too big and I had to squish the "son" at the end of Grayson as basically one letter. We gave it back to the librarian, who nodded.

They gave me the temporary card and said I could take out just a couple of books this time. I went to the children's section and had a hard time making up my mind. I'd never had a library book before. I was used to

my little Golden books like *The Tawny, Scrawny Lion* and *The Poky Little Puppy*, which I could recite by heart after so many readings.

After we handed the librarian the books I'd picked out, she put my card and the books' cards under a little lamp. When the flash went off, the machine made a *boing-y* sound, one that I would always love to hear.

I heard it a lot at the Rugby branch for a couple of years. When I was six, the library moved to its current location, a one-story building at 1000 Utica Avenue, just off the corner of Tilden Avenue.

The Rochelle Tenner Reading Garden was installed in 1997, in the last of several renovations to the building. The Rugby branch has an extensive collection of books in Haitian Creole.

### *Flatlands*

Built in 1955, this two-story library on Flatbush Avenue at Avenue P seemed new the first time I went there on a school field trip, just a few months after we moved from our old apartment to a big house on East 56<sup>th</sup> Street. Miss Gura, the teacher of 2-1, made us select partners for the long walk from P.S. 203, and I got to hold hands with Linda.

Flatlands became my second-favorite library branch. I'd take the B41 bus and sit in the teen reading area even before I had my bar mitzvah, trying not to look like a baby and hoping nobody would make me move. I loved the scuffed-up wood of the card catalog and the typed entries on the little cards.

Sometimes I'd just sit with *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* and look at the entries and try to guess what magazine the listed articles came from when I couldn't immediately recognize the abbreviation for the

title. Other times I'd go over to the shelf of New Books, which you could take out only for two weeks, and pick out one even though I had a lot of schoolwork to do and not much time to read it. Luckily, I was a very fast reader.

The New Books shelf was where I found Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, so good I stayed up an entire night to finish it despite a 9 a.m. Biology and Society class at Brooklyn College. At lunch, I lent it to Linda only because she promised she would finish it before it was overdue.

Linda had the book with her the next Friday night when she and David went to Little Italy for dinner. On Mulberry Street she recognized Erica Jong and her Chinese husband. Linda told Erica Jong how great *Fear of Flying* was and asked her to autograph the book.

When I saw Erica Jong's signature, I worried that the Brooklyn Public Library wouldn't believe it was actually the author's.

"They'll think I defaced the book," I said.

Linda said she'd just put it in the overnight book drop and hope nobody would notice. The library never contacted me to complain, so I guess they either didn't notice or didn't care.

For a while I looked for the autographed copy of *Fear of Flying* on the shelves, always without success. Linda wondered if maybe one of the Flatlands librarians had sent it to a special collection at the main library at Grand Army Plaza. But I told Linda it was bestseller and it made sense for it to be borrowed a lot.

Six years later, the shelves of the Flatlands branch would hold both our first books – although Linda's *Roller Fever* would get taken out a lot more than my short story collection.

### *Kings Bay*

After being housed in several storefronts on Nostrand Avenue near Avenue W, this branch got a permanent home in 1959 and was later expanded twice until it is now a four-story building.

This was quite a ways from our neighborhood, so I would usually only get to stop in when my parents drove us here. We'd eat across the street at Senior's restaurant, where I loved the red cabbage, or a few blocks down at Jahn's ice cream parlor, where they'd give you a free sundae on your birthday.

When I was in tenth grade – the one year I spent in a Manhattan private school – I walked all the way here during the winter break we got so that my rich classmates could go to Florida or the Caribbean with their parents.

By the 1970s, I could drive here on my own. The last book I took out at this branch was Philip Nobile's *Intellectual Skywriting*, about the writers and editors of *The New York Review of Books*. When I dragged the book along to Prof. Baumbach's fiction writing workshop in the Brooklyn MFA program, my classmate Bruce saw it and said, "*Intellectual Skywriting* – man, that sounds like everything you've ever written."

### *Kings Highway*

After I transferred from the private school to Midwood for the last two years of high school, I'd sometimes take the Ocean Avenue bus to Kings Highway and hang out at this three-story branch till it got dark.

This is where I read my first non-school book in Spanish, a novel about a young fisherman who got his girlfriend pregnant. It ended really tragically. I can't remember the title.

Now the Kings Highway branch has foreign language books not just in Spanish and Chinese, but also in Russian, Hebrew, Urdu, Turkish and Arabic.

### *Mill Basin (old)*

This was a storefront on Avenue T between East 58<sup>th</sup> and East 59<sup>th</sup> Street. On the corner of East 58<sup>th</sup> was the luncheonette where I bought my comic books and candy. Next to that was the beauty parlor, then the Chinese laundry, then the grocery and the dry cleaners and the kosher deli. The old Mill Basin branch library was next to the Austin Pharmacy on the corner of East 59<sup>th</sup>.

Only three blocks from our house, this library was where I spent so many hours that I still dream about it, thirty years after it closed. It was an easy walk, but a lot of times I rode over and left my bike in the bike rack. I never used a lock and my bike was never stolen.

This was the library where I first looked up “homosexuality” in all the encyclopedias and dictionaries and where I watched the clock so I could go back home in time for Mom to think I’d actually been at Hebrew school, the place I was supposed to be.

Mom once asked me to stop at the pharmacy next door to the Mill Basin branch and get her a pack of Newports. As I walked back past the library, where some Italian kids were hanging out, a girl pointed to the Newports and asked if she could have a smoke. As I opened the pack and handed her a cigarette, one of the boys said, “Careful, they may be perfumed!” We all started laughing.

A few years later, Bud and I would stop in at the library just before dinner at the deli. Once he found a copy of James Kirkwood’s *Good Times*/

*Bad Times*, which we realized we must have borrowed at about the same time. Next door we'd get frankfurters and French fries and Dr. Brown's Cel-Ray soda. Our favorite waiter, Louis Blugerman, had a business card that read *St. Louis Blugerman Shakespen, Writer & Waiter*.

When the storefront library closed in 1974, the Mill Basin Kosher Deli and Art Gallery expanded and took it over. If you're in the neighborhood, you should stop by for a meal or to check out their Roy Lichtenstein paintings. If you don't ever get to Mill Basin – and most New Yorkers never do – you can click on their website, [www.pastrami.net](http://www.pastrami.net), and they will ship their food overnight anywhere in the U.S.A. from what was once my favorite library.

### *Midwood*

I always thought the Midwood branch was weird because it wasn't on a big avenue but on a side street, East 16<sup>th</sup>, alongside the el near Avenue J. I didn't go here often, because it was out of the way and for some reason this three-story building creeped me out.

The last time I stopped at this branch, I was in my thirties and temporarily living in Judd's apartment while he was in Pennsylvania directing some plays. On the way to a Rosh Hashana dinner at my Great-Aunt Tillie's in Rockaway, I took the D train here from Park Slope to get some kosher pastries at one of the Jewish stores on Avenue J.

Something compelled me to turn up the street and go into the library. I had never realized the branch had such a big auditorium. Looking through the biographies, I found one of Yukio Mishima that looked good, but by 1985 I was a Florida resident and no longer had a Brooklyn Public Library card.

*Flatbush*

On Linden Boulevard, just off Flatbush Avenue, this stately three-story structure was erected in 1905. By the time I worked here in early 1975, the outside of the building was covered with graffiti tags.

An MFA student at Brooklyn College, I found a posting for the minimum-wage job in the placement office. At the interview, knowing that similar workers were still in high school, I didn't mention that I already had an M.A. in English and was going for another graduate degree. Mrs. Tobey hired me on the spot.

I'd come in at 9 a.m. except on Mondays and Wednesdays, when the library opened at that hour; then I'd come in at 8:45 a.m., parking my car in one of the eight spaces in the cramped lot behind the building.

First I'd retrieve the books we'd gotten that had to go to other branches and to Grand Army Plaza. I'd pack them into cases, tie the cases with belts, and put them on carts for the ride to the dumbwaiter that would transport the books to the basement.

Downstairs, I'd take the books from the lift and put them on the conveyer belt. Outside, the man from the Interchange truck would wait for me to send him our outgoing books. When I finished, he'd reverse the conveyer belt and send me cases of books for our branch.

I'd take these books upstairs and screen them to see if anyone had reserved the titles or reported them lost. Then I'd remove the transaction cards from the back pockets and return the books to their proper places on the shelves.

I loved seeing the virgins come in: the brand-new books in their shiny plastic covers, not yet worn from repeated borrowing.



Mrs. Higgins, who supervised part-timers, put me in charge of nonfiction books with the Dewey decimal system numbers 000-799, which were shelved on a mezzanine overlooking the first floor.

I usually took a fifteen-minute break from shelving books at 10:45 a.m., taking a current magazine to the kitchen. There I'd drink tea and eat a slice of cake or pie brought in by one of the librarians, all of whom were white women.

Although some of the librarians had worked together for years, they never called each other by their first names, only "Mrs. Higgins" and "Mrs. Tobey" and so forth.

They all hated the head librarian, Miss Speiss, and called her Miss Beast behind her back. Miss Speiss was very strict about everything. When Mrs. Higgins told me that Miss Speiss wanted the shelves to be of even lengths, she added, "That bitch expects perfection."

Miss Speiss hated the mentally ill white bums and the black kids who hung out in the reading room. "They're up to no good," she'd say repeatedly.

One day, when I was alone with Miss Speiss during my break, she remarked of the tea kettle, "It whistles while it works," which made me think she might not be a total monster.

At this point in my life, I was having girlfriend problems, parent problems, money problems, and writing problems.

The four hours at my job were a respite, flying by quickly even though my shelving task was Sisyphean: no matter how much I accomplished on a particular day, the next morning there were countless rows of books to be shelved all over again.

I took a certain sense of satisfaction in keeping 000-799 neat and orderly and in memorizing the most popular numbers – 796, sports; 616, health; 133, psychic

phenomena – and ones I just liked to learn for fun, like 301.415, books on feminism.

So when a cute, scrawny black boy around thirteen came up to me and said, “I want to find a book on weight lifting,” I could direct him immediately to 613.73 and 796.41.

After working at the Flatbush branch for a month, I got an unexpected offer to teach an evening freshman composition class at Long Island University downtown. For a while I continued to work mornings for \$2 an hour in the library.

It was strange to be treated like a high school kid at one job and a college professor at another, but I liked the library too much to quit – at least until the Saturday one of my students, a black woman my own age, came in to do a research paper I’d assigned.

Mrs. Higgins ordered me downstairs to fetch a book for my puzzled student.

The following Monday when I quit, Miss Spiess expressed her dismay. “One of my best shelvees,” she said. “I suppose you’re going to work at that new McDonald’s.”

The only souvenir of my stay at the Flatbush library came from the one day when Mrs. Tobey was sick and I got to sit at the checkout desk and happily use the machine that made the *boing-y* sound. I took a blank temporary library card from the drawer, and when I got home, I typed up a fictitious new BPL patron, Kevin Cory.

In the three weeks while the card was still good, I figured I’d go to another branch and take out the two books I was limited to. I’d keep the books and no one would ever catch me.

But after “Kevin Cory” had taken out Philip Roth’s *My Life as a Man* and Peter de Vries’s *Forever Panting* and tore off their plastic covers and put them on the

shelves of my own bedroom, I felt guilty and returned them via the book drop.

In recent years the Flatbush branch has undergone extensive renovations, including the installation of new windows, doors, and a Caribbean Literary and Cultural Center.

### *Canarsie*

On Rockaway Parkway and Avenue J, this branch is one of the few Brooklyn libraries not to have a book drop. I learned that when I was almost thirteen, a couple of years after the building opened.

It was the Sunday before my bar mitzvah reception, and we had to go across the street to the men's formalwear shop. I figured that while my brothers were trying on their dinner jackets, I could return an overdue copy of *Manhattan Transfer* to the Canarsie branch. I'd pay the thirty cents fine the next time I borrowed a book.

I looked everywhere for the slot where I could drop in John Dos Passos's novel. When I gave up and ran back across Rockaway Parkway, Dad was in front of the mirror in his tuxedo and he seemed really annoyed that we'd have to stop off at another library on the way home. He told me I should have checked in advance to see if Canarsie had a book drop.

Not yet a man for another six days, I had assumed all libraries had to have one.

Dad said I took too much for granted.

### *Paerdegat*

On East 59<sup>th</sup> Street at Paerdegat Avenue South, this branch was built in 1963, replacing a temporary one in

the former laundry room of the Glenwood projects, where a bunch of my friends from junior high lived.

Eugene and I once trudged here on a Saturday morning in snow about a foot high, trying to get some information for a seventh-grade social studies project on the Dutch New Amersfoort colony in the 1600s. The reference librarian wasn't much help. She said she didn't think that there'd ever been slaves in our neighborhood. It wasn't till the 1990s that I learned that the local tobacco plantations had been filled with slaves.

When I was in grad school, I came here one evening to pick up Linda, who'd been doing research for a magazine article she was writing. At the Ram's Horn Diner a few blocks away, we cheated on our Weight Watchers diet and shared some French onion rings. I tried to order a cherry Tab, but the waiter refused to bring it to me, saying the cherry syrup defeated the purpose of the saccharin.

By the time she was thirty, Linda would be editor-in-chief of *Weight Watchers Magazine*.

When my first book was published, I went to the Paerdegat branch and asked the librarian on duty if he had a copy of the latest issue of *Library Journal*. After he gave it to me, I found the page I wanted and pointed to a review sandwiched between reviews for Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* and Edwin Torres's *After Hours*, which had penciled check marks next to them.

"That's my book," I said. "I wrote it. I was wondering if maybe you could order it?"

The librarian had a handlebar mustache, mottled skin, and a big bald spot combed over. "Let me explain something to you," he said, as if talking to a three-year-old. "We have this thing called a budget. This means we can't order every book that all of you people want us to order."

“Okay,” I said. “I didn’t mean to bother you.” He was creepy, but I felt pretty creepy myself.

The Paerdegat branch was renovated in 2003. Its community meeting room can now seat 50 people.

### *Clarendon*

This branch wasn’t on Clarendon Road but on Nostrand Avenue, a few blocks north of Flatbush Avenue, but it did begin as an unstaffed deposit station in a Clarendon Road drug store in 1915. In 1947, it moved to its present location and achieved full branch status.

When I was in college, this library was still a storefront, but unlike the Mill Basin storefront, the Clarendon branch seemed dark and gloomy. The first time I came here, Elise told me that after she’d moved from her old neighborhood – near the Rugby branch – this became her favorite library. But I couldn’t be expected to feel the same as she did towards it.

The second time I came here was with Eloy and one of his innumerable white girlfriends. She was majoring in early childhood education and looking for copies of *Highlights* in the children’s section. Eloy and I acted out the Goofus and Gallant cartoons until the librarian shushed our giggling.

I went here the third and last time with Stan and Mark, who needed an issue of *Psychology Today* from the year before. At P.S. 203 I had been in classes with Stan, but didn’t meet him again until college, when his family moved down the block. Mark had been one of my few friends in high school; he and Stan were both psych majors who took classes together.

We walked the last block to the library quickly because Stan needed to use the bathroom. At the

checkout desk, they gave Stan the men's room key, which had a big block of wood attached to it.

"He's been having diarrhea every day for the past week," Mark said as he made photocopies of the magazine article. "It's because he's nervous about the wedding." The pages coming out of the machine were the old "wet" dark kind of photocopies.

"I would have thought he'd have diarrhea before the *circumcision*, but not now," I said. "I mean, he and Sharon love each other. They went through so much."

In the beginning they had to sneak around because Sharon's parents didn't want her to marry a non-Jewish guy. Finally they relented when Stan said he'd convert.

At the time, I offered to become a Methodist in Stan's place, to keep things even. "I'm already very methodical," I told Stan, "so it shouldn't be that hard. At least I don't have to deal with a *mohel*."

Stan just said, "*Richie*," and I let it go.

Ten days after Stan came out of the men's room at the Clarendon branch, Mark and I and four other guys were outside Leonard's catering hall in a light snow, tying ribbons and balloons and a "Just Married" sign to the back of Stan and Sharon's Pontiac.

Unlike Mark, Stan did become a psychologist. The last I heard, he and Sharon were living in Georgia and had two grandchildren.

In 1990, a new building opened on the Clarendon branch site. Its distinctive design featured a skylit reading room and a recreational courtyard that won the Arts Commission Award for Excellence.

### *Mill Basin (new)*

The new Mill Basin library opened in 1974 on the corner of Ralph Avenue and Avenue N, across the street

from Kings Pharmacy, where I used to buy my Pepto-Bismol tablets and Compoz sleep aids, and from Landi's Pork Store, where I felt myself starting to cry along with the women behind the counter when they informed me that Pope John XXIII had died.

This 7,500-square-foot brick building had been a vacant lot where Stan would meet Sharon when they first started dating in secret. So it would look like she was seeing a nice Jewish boy, Peter would pick up Sharon at her house. Then they'd meet Stan here and he and Sharon would go to the movies or a restaurant or just walk on the beach. Stan and Sharon would arrange with Peter to meet here again at a certain time so that Peter could take Sharon back home to Whitman Drive.

I'd had a slight off-and-on crush on Peter since junior high, but he never seemed to know I was alive. The first time I went to the new Mill Basin library, oddly enough, Peter was coming out the door with the original cast recording of *Follies*. Although we'd sat at the same table at Stan and Sharon's wedding six months before, Peter struggled to recall my name. We made small talk about Sondheim and he said it was nice to see me again.

As spacious and modern as it was, the new Mill Basin branch wasn't a place I wanted to spend much time in, not like the old storefront where I'd hung out as a kid. By then I was too old to spend a lot of time in libraries. Mostly I went only when it was necessary, and then I'd usually go to academic libraries or to Manhattan or Grand Army Plaza.

The last time I walked into the Mill Basin library, I was close to 50 and spending the summer in a Williamsburg brownstone. It took me over an hour to get to the old neighborhood on the B48 and B41 buses.

After browsing the branch's collection of CDs and videos, I signed up for one of the six computers in the adults' reading room to check my e-mail. The card

catalog has long been online, and those old checkout machines with the *boing-y* sound I loved disappeared twenty years before.

This library is currently closed for renovation.



## 1001 WAYS TO DEFEAT GREEN ARROW

"If you said '*You're an incredible fuck*,' would you mean it in an angry way, like 'you fucker' or in a sexual way, like 'you're a really great fuck'?" my beautiful stepbrother asks me.

Noah and I are sitting outdoors at The Leaf and Bean, both of us at our laptops. He's got an iMac; I've got an old Dell that will freeze up suddenly for no reason. Since he's working on his screenplay, I assume he's asking me this question for writing purposes.

"I don't know," I say. "I guess it would be in an angry way. But, you know, Noah, I can't see myself saying that."

Unlike me, Noah types with two fingers. But he's speedy. Three nights ago, when I picked him up at the airport, after we hugged gingerly – he doesn't like to be touched – I noticed what looks like a wedding ring on his left hand. I know he doesn't buy into this marriage shit being the be-all and end-all of gay rights, but then he's been with Frank for almost six years now.

Noah sighs the sigh I've heard nearly every waking hour we've been together, stops typing and looks at me. I save what I've got of the summary of the March 1952 issue of *Adventure Comics* I've been working on.

Noah couldn't care less about Green Arrow, finding him just a ripoff of Batman: a millionaire playboy who fights crime with a teenage boy – Speedy, instead of Robin. All the Batstuff – Batmobile, Batplane, Bat-signal – becomes the Arrowmobile, Arrowplane, and Arrow-signal.

I guess Green Arrow *was* a ripoff. His special crime-fighting weapons like the glue arrow, the net arrow, and the boxing-glove arrow are pretty laughable.

*"1001 Ways to Defeat Green Arrow." Writer: France E. Herron. Art: George Papp. A professor sells a book called "1001 Ways to Defeat Green Arrow" to the underworld, full of pre-planned schemes to defeat Green Arrow.*

"Dude," Noah says, "you shouted out 'You're an incredible fuck' around 4 a.m. It woke me up."

Now I remember him coming into my bedroom on the way to the bathroom at that hour. I know I was awake. I don't remember the dream or the shout, and I tell him that.

"Wow," I say.

"Yeah, it scared me a little," Noah says. "I figured it's 4 a.m., you might be up for the night. I took a Lunesta myself because I wasn't sure I could get back to sleep either."

"Wow," I say again, "Jeez, Nonoy, I'm really embarrassed."

*Nonoy* is what his mom called him, and now that she's dead, he no longer hates when I do it. But then, prior to last week, I hadn't seen him in five years.

Yesterday I pretended I had stuff to do – Noah has grown so incredibly polite he won't tell me when he needs his space – and when I dropped him off here at the coffee bar, I asked him what time he wanted me to swing by and pick him up.

"Oh, twelve or twelve-thirty," he said.

And I said, "Okay, I'll be here at twelve-fifteen and just gaze at you adoringly till you're ready."

He laughed.

In the comic book I'm summarizing, Green Arrow is basically just a back-up feature to the starring Superboy.

*Many of the schemes here involve understanding Green Arrow's psychology, then using his typical responses against him. This is a subtle approach. Green Arrow eventually understands this.*

Noah shrugs. He hates his hair, he says. He's growing it long for the new movie: stringy black, it's curling up at the ends. It looks pre-Raphaelite. From the first time I saw him, eighteen and sullen and drunk at our parents' engagement party, Noah always has been easy to look at.

Listening to him used to be more of a challenge. "Dude, you know you want to blow me," he mumbled that first time as we watched my father dance the rumba with his mom. Divina had been my dead mother's Filipina nurse.

Then he said, less mumbly: "And if you play your cards right, I'll let you."

I was twice his age then – the same age he is now. Divina wasn't much older than me, and while we were friends at the beginning, by the time she convinced my father to get married – just four months after my mother passed away – I couldn't stand her.

Her son, however, was a different matter. We sneaked off to the pool house. Within minutes he'd basically passed out, not that I let that stop anything.

But that was in the Middle Ages and I don't remember any of my dreams last night.

*Herron would write other tales of psychological manipulation by bad guys, such as "The Invasion From Indiana" (Strange Adventures #49, October 1954). Green*

*Arrow's eventual call to abandon his predictable use of logic has a Rimbaud-like feel.*

Four nights ago I *did* have a dream where I was fucking him. Naturally I wasn't going to say anything about it. It's been eighteen years, he knows how I feel, I'd like to think that he respects me so much that he won't say anything about it.

On this visit Noah has made sure I never see him without a shirt. I don't think he wears a t-shirt to bed at home, but Frank would be the one to ask about that.

If I try to think of Noah when I masturbate, it won't work. And it's not just that I'm getting old. I really don't want to fuck him now, whatever my dreams say.

Looking at him is something else.

"I guess I'll have to tell my shrink about yelling out in my sleep," I say, picking up the copy of *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* next to his laptop. "I didn't know I ever did that."

He stops typing. "Your trick?"

"What?"

"You said you'll have to tell your trick?"

"*Shrink. Shrink, not trick.*" I thumb through the book, not noticing Anais Nin's name on page 183. "How long do you know me?" I ask him.

Noah smiles beatifically. He still can. "All the time I've been clean and sober."

"Yeah, the stuff earlier you don't remember."

"Like you and your dreams."

I put down the Maya Deren book, gently, and go back to my old comic.

*Papp depicts Oliver and Speedy in their book-lined home here. This was typical of the comics, and their reverence*

*for reading and study. Later, Infantino will depict both The Flash and Adam Strange as major readers.*

Our parents weren't married long, but for the first few weeks Noah and I had this very weird, well, I wouldn't use the word *relationship*. Noah trusts his actors, would let them pick the word.

My father died eighteen months after his wedding to Divina, but Noah was living on the streets of downtown Hollywood by then. He didn't show for a long time. Lucky us, I figured. He was pretty out of control.

Eventually Noah turned up scrawny and bruised and strung out but still sort of beautiful. His mom asked me to join in the intervention because, well, because basically except for the sister she'd brought over from Manila, Divina didn't know anyone else.

Her new boyfriend hadn't ever met Noah, and Noah's few old friends were no help.

I went. I said to myself it was just because I wanted to see how more of my father's money was going to be wasted on this useless kid. But that wasn't it.

Even at the moment it happened, I knew it was worth the humiliation of having my stepmother and her sister hear everything if that was what was needed to get him into rehab.

Though it was hard to watch his beautiful face wildly distorted like a manga *bishonen* under high stress, in those days being spat on by Noah was pretty much of a turn-on.

Today people who are into indie films are impressed when I tell them I'm related to Noah.

Some of them think I can get them something out of him, but as with almost everyone I've known in a life that I still want to be longer than that of the lives of our

parents – Noah’s ability to do anything for another person is overestimated.

He’s sighing again, and scowling like Condoleeza Rice, narrowing those brown eyes as he stares at the screen.

I start to touch him, then stop myself. Yesterday in the car – both of us in shorts, t-shirts and sandals – I touched his bare thigh trying to make a point. I hadn’t meant to.

But now he’s noticed my pullback.

“Oh, you’re so like in *It Happened One Night*,” he says, “with the thing between them.”

I’m too embarrassed to respond.

In the 1970s Green Arrow lost all his money, grew a goatee, got a new costume and became strident and kind of obnoxious. Teenaged Speedy was revealed to be a heroin addict.

*The best part of this tale is toward the end. It involves some of Herron’s unusual ideas about science and nature, here birds trained to find the color green. This also fits in with Herron’s interest in colors as a means of expression and communication.*

Noah still wants me to correct his pronunciation of words like *disingenuous*.

He’s basically an autodidact, so even at this age and stage of his career he says words he’s only read and never heard.

I’m happy to correct him, just as I always was. That’s about all the nurturing he allows me in this friendship.

Noah has Frank and his actors to nurture.

A lot of people call his films cold. The characters are not easy to like.

Unlike me with my stupid comic-book criticism, Noah's an artist, a very cerebral one.

It's a wonder I find him so easy to be with. Especially when I know that the first word a lot of people think of when they think of Noah is *difficult*. He'll tell you himself what a difficult person he is.

If I tried to imitate Señor Wences' hand arguing with him – "*Deefeeicult for you, eezy for me*" – Noah wouldn't laugh.

We never say we were stepbrothers, and I guess technically we were that for only a year and a half in the late Eighties, around the time Green Arrow was depicted as a bald old man who was missing his left arm. He had a drunken grudge against Superman.

*Papp does a good job with the finale. The paint allows him to create irregular compositions of considerable inventiveness. He also achieves surrealism with giant toys, including a longitudinally-striped beach ball that is a pure geometric object.*

Noah takes out his tin of Bert's Bees lip balm. Since he's stopped smoking, it gives him something to do with his hands when he's stuck. Sighing, he gets up to order more coffee inside. He even asks me if want another latte.

"No, I'm okay, Nonoy." That's as familiar as I get. I don't look at him when I say it. I'm writing.

Noah shot his first film – none of my family money was harmed in the making of it, even though by that point I didn't care – on video.

But afterwards, because several film festivals – yep, even Sundance – were showing interest, he hired a company in Burbank to transform it to 16mm so he could get an edited cut as quickly as possible.

The company assured him that a workable 16mm version with quality print and sound would be ready in time. It wasn't, and it seemed an insurmountable obstacle. But ultimately it didn't matter. He got second prize in Houston, great reviews in the *Seattle Weekly* and other papers. That was three films ago.

"The guy's got integrity," someone told me recently.

There are times when I wish Noah would at least feign interest in what I'm doing so I could update him on Green Arrow and Speedy. By 2000 there was a new Speedy, a former prostitute named Mia who was HIV-positive. Green Arrow decided to lose his mask when someone pointed out it did not disguise his identity at all.

But those moments pass, and when we look at each other, it's as if history didn't exist.

The day after tomorrow, when I drop Noah off at the airport, he's going to say, "Let me give you a hug."

After that quick, awkward embrace – you could call it fraternal if you wanted to – the next time I see him will be on DVD.



## MY LIFE IN THE NEW YORK POST

It was enough to make you run for a valium: a letter from E.L. Doctorow, author of the acclaimed *Ragtime*, pushing for publication of a story entitled "Who Swings? Swaps? The Weird Sex Lives of Jewish American Novelists." Included in this tasteless (and witless) exercise by one Richard Grayson were supposed "dossiers" on the intimate preferences of such high quality literati as Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Cynthia Ozick and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

This arrived on the desk of Village Voice book maven Eliot Fremont-Smith, along with an endorsement of "Eddie" Doctorow on his own letterhead, inquiring, "Are you man enough to publish such a hard-hitting expose?" No, replied Eliot, who smelled a phony, and sent the stuff off to Doctorow, who forwarded it to his lawyers, who fired off a warning letter to the mysterious Grayson in Brooklyn, who swears he knows of "no such letter" but can't explain the whole darn thing, leading one to believe his literary career may be blessedly brief.

- *"Literary impostor at large," Page Six, 6/17/78*

A Brooklyn College English professor, who says he's protesting the country's "circus-like" political campaigns, has decided to take a leave from the ivory tower and run for Vice President. Richard Grayson, 28, is even officially recognized by the Federal Election Commission. The federal agency has been flooding him with campaign finance forms since the day he wrote them – and they've never questioned his eligibility.

Grayson's biggest concern now is raising the bus fare

to New Hampshire to campaign for the nation's first primary. He's already begun a furious campaign. He held a \$10-a-plate bagel dinner, which brought in \$10. His brother was the sole guest and contributor.

The U.S. Constitution puts the age for holding the office at 35. While Grayson is too young for the job, his political spirit has not been dampened. Not particular about his political party, Grayson is waiting for an offer from any ticket: "Jimmy, Jerry, Teddy, they're all the same to me."

- *"Prof flips hat into 3-ring circus," article, 8/2/79*

Richard Grayson of Brooklyn says he feels so guilty about patronizing prostitutes on Pacific Street that he wants his name announced on The John Hour. "I deserve to be publicly humiliated," Grayson, a 28-year-old writer, said, asking for his name to be read aloud on the controversial radio show ordered by Mayor Koch.

But Mary Perot Nichols, president of WNYC-FM, says he'll have to wait until he's caught. "We can't put the name on the air of anyone who's not already convicted of solicitation," said Nichols.

Grayson says he needs the punishment: "It's the only thing that will stop me before I strike again."

- *"I want my name on show, says writer," article, 10/5/79*

Nobody messes with Fred Silverman. Particularly not playful prankster Richard Grayson, who says he's aiming for the Vice Presidency in 1980 – with Fred as the head of the ticket. Grayson's even registered his "Elect Fred Silverman" committee with the FEC, and has gotten lots of publicity for his zany scheme – which includes plans to alleviate the gas crunch with a televised "Bowling for Gallons" show.

As usual, NBC's peacock finds her feathers ruffled by such shenanigans, and the network's attorneys have sent Grayson a letter with the tragic news that "Mr. Silverman is not a candidate for the Presidency or any other office." NBC also advises that unless Grayson ceases these "unauthorized, possibly illegal, and self-serving activities" they just might take him to court. Grayson's response: "I'd love it."

- *"Fred's wrath," Page Six, 12/17/79*

Socialite Gloria Vanderbilt, who backed into prominence with her name on the rear of the jeans she designs may next turn up in the political arena. A new party, called "The Right To Be the Life of the Party Party," is pushing the ageless Gloria for U.S. Senator.

"Gloria is much more stylish than Bess Myerson and Liz Holtzman, who is downright frumpy," says Richard Grayson, "treasurer and beautiful person" of Gloria's election committee. Among other things, the Vanderbilt signature on U.S. money will strengthen the dollar, says Grayson.

However, Gloria has not officially given her stamp of approval to this grand scheme. Through her lawyer, Tom Andrews, she said that the efforts in her behalf are "unauthorized and unappreciated."

- *"'Beautiful people' want to put Gloria label in Senate race," article, 12/21/79*

He couldn't get Fred Silverman to run for President last year, so political prankster Richard Grayson's got a new choice for the Oval Office – Richard Nixon. Grayson's Nostalgia Party has filed papers with the Federal Election Commission supporting a ticket of Nixon and the long-lost Spiro Agnew. Being elected Prez

more than twice isn't allowed, but Grayson isn't worried. He's determined to bring back the days when "nobody was holding any Americans hostage except the North Koreans, and that was no big deal."

- *"Nostalgic," Page Six, 5/12/80*

PASS THE AMMO: The war isn't being waged in boardrooms, but on Broad Street, near Wall Street, panhandler Richard Grayson is battling to take over R.J. Reynolds-Nabisco if only he can come up with the \$25.4 billion.

- *Caption on photo of man holding Wall Street Journal coffee cup and sign reading 'PLEASE HELP I NEED \$25.4 BILLION TO LAUNCH A LEVERAGED BUYOUT OF RJR-NABISCO - CHECKS, CASH, BONDS ACCEPTED,' 10/28/88*

The Trump Rescue Fund isn't doing too well. West Side author Richard Grayson has been out on the street this week soliciting for the fund, which he created.

"We're trying to drum up contributions to help Donald Trump fight off these business problems," Grayson told PAGE SIX. The would-be fundraiser has gotten lots of smiles, "but I haven't gotten one single contribution."

Their entire endowment consists of one check Grayson made out "in the mid two figures." But Grayson isn't giving up. He's still pitching: "If people don't want the Trump era to end, they should give till it hurts."

- *"Till it hurts," Page Six, 6/8/90*

Martha Stewart might have a few million in the bank – but she's about to get a little financial help from her fans. One devotee of the domestic diva has launched

"The Martha Stewart Defense Fund" and is urging supporters to send cash to Stewart's swanky Turkey Hill show home in Westport, Conn.

Richard Grayson said he started the fund because he's horrified his culinary idol is being depicted as a common criminal in the media.

"Martha is up against all the resources of the federal judicial system, led by John Ashcroft, who has made no secret of his dislike of anything resembling good taste. She will be forced to spend millions on her legal bills," said Grayson, a Florida lawyer and the self-appointed fund chairman.

Grayson, 52, who's sent \$100, says Stewart is being persecuted by the Bush administration because she doesn't believe in war, only "domestic harmony."

- *"Fans Spring to diva's defense," article, 6/6/03*

## PRESIDENTIAL SNAPSHOTS

*Me & Ford, 1975*

I am as old as Dad's Mustang, and my blue parka almost matches the pony car's Acapulco Blue exterior as I stand, a bit unsteadily, on the car's hood. I am in love with the 260-cubic-inch V-8 engine, which Dad lets me pretend to power up in the mornings on West 87th Street when we are waiting for our space to become legal at 11 a.m. The Mustang caused many fights between my parents, usually around the time Dad and I would trudge out, coats over our pajamas, to double-park the car on the legal side. In the photo, you can't see the windshield, where I've placed our street address, apartment number, and phone number in case the car next to the curb needs to get out. Two years later, when Dad leaves, he will take the Mustang with him to South Carolina but not me.

*Me & Carter, 1978*

I am eight years old, standing outside the stage door of The Manhattan Theater Company on East 73rd Street holding hands with the actress and singer I've just watched in my first musical, *Ain't Misbehavin'*. Nell and I are both smiling, and I've just told her that my favorite song in that Fats Waller revue was her "Cash for Your Trash" even though it was actually a different one that began "I'm gonna sit right down and write myself a letter and make believe it came from you." I haven't seen Dad in over a year. Nell kisses me before she takes off, and I am half-drunk with her perfume. A few years later I will

get into a fistfight with my best friend after he says that *Gimme A Break* sucks.

*Me & Reagan, 1986*

A sophomore at Bronx Science, I've got my arm around the broad shoulders of a plywood cutout of a man with a broad, benign smile, dapper in his navy blue suit. You can't see what I see, the tape on his neck, which the photographer – who charged me five dollars as my friends looked on laughing – says is a result of the Gipper's head being knocked off by an irate passer-by shortly after the bombing of Libya. I will spend Christmas in South Carolina with another older man, a real one instead of a life-size replica, but I'll get no further with him than with this prop on Times Square, except maybe that we'll share the same opinion of Iran-Contra.

*Me & Bush, 1991*

Home from Dartmouth for Christmas – I wasn't going to spend another one in South Carolina – I'm back on East 73rd Street, just down the block from where Nell and I embraced when I was young and innocent. Not so innocent, this picture taken in a friend's apartment is the result of binge drinking and some drugs I can no longer remember – as well as the compliant girl I'd met only at this party. Outside, snow is falling, but we're posing on the bed of middle-aged parents spending the holidays in the Caribbean. In that bedroom it might as well be the Caribbean. At the time it seemed really hot, and the wild nakedness is still arousing. If I'm lucky, you won't see this on anyone's website.

*Me & Clinton, 1996*

My t-shirt says "Hell's Kitchen," that seedy old nickname for the neighborhood where I have a railroad flat with a tub not far from my stove. Unlike the name the real estate developers gave it, Hell's Kitchen has the romantic air of shantytowns, waterfront ruffians, grisly slaughterhouses, drunken brawls in saloons. When I come home late from my job ten blocks north and four blocks east of the stoop I stand in front of, I count the crack dealers and prostitutes as I walk. My mother, only five subway stops away, has not stopped worrying about me and is not mollified when we have dinner at the new white-tablecloth restaurants on Ninth Avenue. She tells my girlfriend about ancient gangs like the Westies and wonders if we ever hear gunfire. "No," says the woman who took the photo, the woman I love. "We just hear the sounds of gentrification."

*Me & Bush, 2003*

On our rooftop garden in Park Slope, the lilac I'm crouching next to doesn't look like much: just a three-foot shrub with skinny branches that don't reach as far as I'd like. But it's May, and Miss Kim's pale lavender blossoms are out, their spicy fragrance permeating the Brooklyn air. Since the surgery I've been hanging out here a lot, and once again I'm captured, squinting at the sun this time, the pruning shears in my good hand. You've got to prune lilacs immediately after they bloom because once they stop flowering, they start making buds for the next year. The sooner you prune, the less chance you have of cutting off next year's bloom.



## THE COOL GUY

When I was 19 and just starting to date my first real girlfriend, I had to pass muster with her best friend, The Cool Guy, who was 17 and rich and handsome and charming. He played the piano and had a mustache and chest hair, and I knew he didn't like me at all at first because my girlfriend told me that. Maybe he thought I was taking advantage of her or that I wasn't good enough for her or that I was some kind of asshole.

The Cool Guy had a girlfriend to whom he kept proposing marriage. My first girlfriend, The Cool Guy, and his girlfriend had all known each other since eighth grade.

The Cool Guy was always calling his best friend, my first girlfriend, to complain that *his* girlfriend felt she was too young to get married and wanted to date other guys.

For my part, I thought The Cool Guy's girlfriend was sweet but kind of mousy, and I wondered why he was so crazy about her.

A couple of times we double-dated, but it always made me nervous to be in The Cool Guy's presence because I figured he was making fun of me behind my back – which is what I heard he did from a friend of mine. “He was imitating the way you talk,” my friend told me. I was very self-conscious about my weird voice.

After six months, my first girlfriend broke up with me and started going out with another guy we all knew, someone I'd thought of as my friend.

All of a sudden The Cool Guy became my champion, saying that his best friend was making a real mistake because her new boyfriend was a creepy poet with no visible means of support. That made me feel good because I was totally depressed by the breakup.

The Cool Guy met a girl from Connecticut at a party and broke up with his girlfriend from junior high. His ex-girlfriend was a nice person, but I figured she was reacting to being dumped much better than I was because she'd kept turning down The Cool Guy's marriage proposals and continued to date other guys.

I sort of liked this third girl, who was really sexy and always surrounded by a bunch of guys who followed her around. The Cool Guy was one of them, although he was clearly in love with his Connecticut girlfriend – he just couldn't see her that often because she lived far away.

One time a bunch of us were drinking Sangria at the Jolly Bull Pub and The Cool Guy started telling what he thought was a funny story about my ex-girlfriend and her new boyfriend – by then her fiancé. They had been over The Cool Guy's house and apparently so seized by passion that The Cool Guy returned to his bedroom to find them having sex on his waterbed.

That hurt me a lot, and I went into the men's room and started crying. When I returned to our table, The Cool Guy seemed oblivious to my distress. Later, the third girl, the one I liked, told me, "Today some people said things that shouldn't have been said."

But I figured The Cool Guy didn't mean to hurt me, and when his birthday came around, I bought him a Batman comic from the Golden Age. It featured Two-Face, but I didn't mean it as a message.

I also invited The Cool Guy to a séance some friends of mine were having to contact what one thought was a ghost in his house. I ended up holding hands with the third girl on one side and with The Cool Guy on the other. Afterwards we got stoned and played raga music while watching a UN Security Council meeting with the sound off. The Cool Guy lay on the floor, with the third girl stroking his hair. I was mellow about everything.

The next weekend I slept with the third girl. It didn't work out too well. I was sure she thought The Cool Guy was a much better lover than I was.

I didn't mention the third girl to The Cool Guy, and I wasn't even sure he had slept with her. One night I went over to his house and we both got totally wrecked and something weird came over me and I sort of kissed him, but I don't think he noticed.

I didn't see much of anyone for a while. My first girlfriend got married, which sort of freaked me out, but I tried to concentrate on my classes. I took a Classics course, sitting next to The Cool Guy's ex-girlfriend.

We'd have coffee after class and eventually I asked her out. I fell in love with her pretty fast. I learned exactly what The Cool Guy had seen in her.

The Cool Guy was cool about my going out with his ex-girlfriend. He told me that in order to make sure she was not late when we went to the movies, I should always tell her that the movie started 15 minutes earlier than it actually did. That trick worked.

The Cool Guy's girlfriend and I were together for a couple of years and then decided to break up. It wasn't like my breakup with my first girlfriend or her breakup with The Cool Guy because there wasn't another person.

Maybe that was why we were able to go back to being friends after just a couple of months. She confided in me that she and The Cool Guy sometimes talked on the phone. I always had the feeling, even in the two years we were dating, that her true love was The Cool Guy.

I sort of hoped they could get back together, because they were both nice and I thought first love was romantic. But of course they both got involved with other people.

I lost touch with everyone eventually, although one Gay Pride Day I ran into the third girl, who like me, had come out. We started going to dinner together every

couple of months, sometimes with her girlfriend and my boyfriend, and sometimes just ourselves.

Even though the third girl and I were both gay, we were still attracted to each other although we didn't do anything but talk about it. She told me she'd heard that my first girlfriend had divorced her husband, the guy she'd broken up with me for, and had had an affair with The Cool Guy.

That shocked me because I'd known them as best friends. I heard it didn't work out too well.

Years passed. I connected again with my second girlfriend, the Cool Guy's first girlfriend, and I became friendly with her husband, and her kids seemed to like me. We never talked about The Cool Guy except for the time I saw his father's obituary.

She had always liked The Cool Guy's father, and so did I. But I didn't know where to send a sympathy note.

Then, one day, I got an e-mail with the subject heading "Hello from the past." It was The Cool Guy. He said he'd stumbled across my web page and wanted to say hi. It had been over 25 years since we'd last been in touch.

The Cool Guy was the CEO of a cool company. He and his young wife had a three-month old son – named after his father – who'd already been to Asia and Europe. On his personal web page I saw pictures of them, the house they lived in, and his two grown kids from his first marriage.

The Cool Guy said he still had the old Batman comic I'd bought him for his birthday. He said he often thought about his three oldest friends: his first girlfriend (my second girlfriend), my first girlfriend (his old best friend), and me. I was really flattered to be included.

I told The Cool Guy all about his first girlfriend and what a great husband and kids she had. We agreed she was incredible. I gave him her e-mail address and then I

wrote to her and said I hoped that was okay. She said it was.

Since then I've spent time with both my second girlfriend and The Cool Guy – separately, of course, when I've been in the cities where they live.

Because I'm sentimental, I hope they're e-mailing each other occasionally – or at least that they connected one time – but I've never asked them about it.

You've got to give your friends their privacy. I really hope they won't mind my writing this about them. My boyfriend tells me not to worry so much about it.

## CONSELYEA STREET

“Man, he wants you for that apartment,” Lance is telling me as we’re driving on the Prospect Expressway on the way to a job out in Midwood, to some Russian Jew’s mini-mansion on Ocean Avenue. You can’t believe the way they’ve taken these old houses and renovated them, adding on whole wings and rooms that were never meant to be on such small pieces of property. But that’s New York in the twenty-first century, where every conversation seems to begin and end with real estate. I guess it was that way in the 80’s and 90’s, too, but back in 1912 when my great-grandfather bought the brownstone on Conselyea Street, there was no such thing as real estate, just homes for families to live in. And that’s what we did.

My great-grandfather died before I was born, but when I was growing up, my great-grandmother had the apartment on the top floor, my grandparents had the one on the third floor, and Mom and Dad and Ralph and I were on the lower two floors. It was a tight fit, but the house was ours. It’s still ours – *mine*. Ralph got the beach house in Greenport, which was fine with both of us, because his wife loves her beach, and when Mom and Dad were alive, Marilyn got used to having her summer rental without paying Hamptons prices. So I got Brooklyn. Probably the brownstone (I still don’t like to call it “my house”) is worth more on the open market than the Greenport house, but Ralph doesn’t say a word. He’s a real estate lawyer, and Marilyn’s a lawyer, too, and though they’re in the middle of putting the kids through college, they’re only paying SUNY tuition. Their oldest, my niece Nikki, is graduating Binghamton this spring with a useless major in English and when she

comes back to the city, they'll have to support her for a while. Still, Ralph and Marilyn have enough for their timeshare in St. Maarten and the boat and God knows what else.

I keep my eyes on the road and my hands on the truck's steering wheel and my mouth closed, so Lance says again, "He's only after your apartment." Lance is 24, straight, engaged to be married, and he gets away with murder with our boss. *His* boss, actually. My relationship with the Tri-State Gating Company is that I'm an independent contractor. Everything I earn is under the name of the Greenpoint Lumber Company, which Grandpa Mazzeo started, and which long ago became nothing more than a shell corporation with Ralph and me as the only officers and shareholders.

I'll never forget the day Ralph called from Atlanta and said, "I've seen the future, and it's this place called Home Depot." Family lumber businesses were dead, but we were sitting on valuable land – real estate – and eventually we sold out for a couple of million. Most of my share – it's a lot, lot less when taxes are taken out – I lost by letting the financial planner from Salomon Smith Barney invest in things I had no business investing in, but who didn't come home and watch CNBC every day when the market bubble was at its peak? I got a hungry young lawyer, and she sued the brokerage house – with the judge I played up the dumb blue-collar angle pretty good – and we got a decent settlement, but it was probably a tenth of what I'd once had. I should have just bought a condo in Florida and a house on Long Island; I'd have a lot more money now because real estate is only going up.

So I have to work for a while yet. We kept the lumber company as a convenient way for me to bill the gating company. All these mini-mansions and estates have to have gates, of course, and the electronic systems are now so complex and delicate that when we're not

installing them, we're troubleshooting when they don't open, don't close, don't go up, don't go down. Lance and I spend the greater part of our day stuck in traffic actually, switching the AM dial from to NewsRadio 88 to 1010 WINS every few minutes to hear how horrendous the tie-up on the LIE is going to be or what's the least worst crossing to Jersey. We've done everyone from Bruce Springsteen to Howard Stern to that convicted felon Martha Stewart. The jobs mean money – but for me, it's not a good thing. I'd rather be doing anything but working.

We're on Ocean Parkway now. If you time the lights right, you can make it almost to almost Quentin Road without stopping, but otherwise you're screwed and have to stop at just about every cross street. Lance, of course, was one of those little kids who was maniacally patient with his magnifying glass when he was torturing ants, and not hearing me say anything in reply to his two previous questions – because I didn't say anything – now says, *"Doesn't it bother you?"*

I shake my head no. "Sometimes you don't time the lights right," I tell him. "It's just a matter of luck."

"I was talking about Neo," Lance says, exasperated. As if I didn't say what I said to piss Lance off in the first place.

Of course it's my own damn fault for telling that moron Lance anything about my private life. But I get lulled by the fact that he feels he has to tell me every detail about his big fat straight life, from the problems with his fiancée's family to stuff about their sex life that no normal gay guy wants to hear about. Lance talks way more than any two gay men I know. And he loves to gossip. And to go shopping. His fiancée has him talking about things you see in those home and design magazines



my sister-in-law devours. The Fab Five wouldn't change a thing about Lance.

After Lance met Neo that one afternoon when I got stupid in a bar in the East Village, Neo asked me if it ever bothered me, spending the whole workday riding around and working on gates with "such an attractive guy."

"Lance is an asshole," I said. "And he's about a zero-point-one on the attractiveness scale."

"He's young," Neo said. "And blond."

"I've never liked blonds," I told Neo. "I'm not like you." I think Asian guys must have a thing for blonds since they've all got this jet-black hair.

Neo is an artist – performance and visual and I guess conceptual – who's subletting a loft about ten blocks from Conselyea Street, in the part of Williamsburg where the yuppies are starting to encroach on the artists and hipsters. And from Neo's point of view, even worse than the single yuppies are the families starting to move into the neighborhood. Young couples who should be moving from Manhattan to places like Scarsdale are walking their strollers down Bedford Avenue. Despite the recession, rents just keep skyrocketing and guys like Naotaka are screwed.

Yeah, Neo is from Japan originally, although his English is great, probably better than mine. At first when he told me to call him Neo I thought he thought I was too stupid to pronounce Naotaka, but it turns out he saw *The Matrix* like a zillion times and fell in love with it. The first one, at least, was a decent movie – the fight scenes were great – but you'd think an artist would like something a little more intellectual. He likes Keanu Reeves, who is okay, but I'm more interested in Laurence Fishburne.

I met Neo on AOL. I don't really go to bars. I don't drink anymore and that part of my life is over. Thinking about what I did in the Seventies and Eighties gets me

tired. But then, one thing I didn't do in the Eighties was die. I went to a lot of memorial services, though, but that shit is mostly over. Anyway, I need to get to bed early. I wake up like 5:30 a.m., no matter what time I've dropped off to sleep. I get up and think about all the people that used to live in the brownstone with me – I've never really lived anywhere else, since I took over the top floor when I was in my twenties when my great-grandmother died.

It's just me on the bottom two floors now, and Marilyn's friend Tina, the schoolteacher, in the third floor apartment, and the top floor is currently vacant since I finally kicked out Drew. He was living mostly in L.A. anyway since that Comedy Channel series of his took off, and of course he was paying me a fraction of what the apartment was worth since Mom and Dad couldn't bear to charge market rents. What did Drew care? He was happy to mail me a check for \$600 every month and use it when he'd fly into New York to take meetings or check out the comedy clubs.

Anyway, Neo: I'm not in love with him or anything stupid, but we're more than just fuck buddies, I guess. He's really cute in a rugged kind of way, not that he doesn't know that and make me suffer for it. He actually has more chest hair than I do, and I'm three-quarters Sicilian. Before I knew him, I was so dumb I didn't even know Japanese guys could have chest hair. He can't quite grow sideburns, however. Mine are mostly gray.

It's nice to see someone close by in the neighborhood, too. I mean, we're two subway stops from Manhattan, that's what's so great about this part of Brooklyn, but after a day of driving the truck from East Hampton out to the Jersey shore and up to Westchester, then back to the city, the ten minutes or so on the L train between Lorimer Street and Union Square seems like a schlep. Of course in one sense, it's the very same neighborhood; in another, it's not. Conselyea Street was

old Italian Williamsburg, where the Catholic guys carry around that seven-foot tower every July on the Feast of the Giglio. (We've been Baptists for generations, since they converted us back in Sicily.)

Mom died only a couple of years ago, and she wouldn't recognize how things have changed. Even the poor Hispanics a few blocks south on Metropolitan Avenue are being displaced by the invasion of the anti-barbarians. God knows how the Orlando Funeral Home is going to make itself trendy enough to stay in business.

Neo and I eat dinner at this restaurant called Khao Sarn. It's always a new restaurant these days, but this was a fairly unpretentious Thai place, with a decent calamari salad that made me think about Mom.

We don't talk much during the meal. I look at his hands a lot.

Of course we can't go home directly after because Neo's got to drag me to this performance space on North 3rd, which is in what I think used to be some kind of a clock factory. We are watching something a buddy of his wrote – and I guess directed, if that's what you call what they do with this stuff. The title of this piece is *The Rise, Fall and Subsequent Dislocations of the Power Broker Robert Moses, as Performed on the Venice Boardwalk by the Boys of the South Bronx Under the Direction of the DJ Grandwizzard Theodore*. Or *Moses/Grandwizzard* for short.

I'm the working class hero, but I get the allusion to *Marat/Sade* even if Neo doesn't. Okay, I was a teen hanging out in the Village in the late Sixties – yes, I knew The Stonewall Inn; no, I never went in there and when I saw *The Daily News* headline about the bar raid and riot and "Queen Bees Stinging Mad," I was naïve enough to think it was funny and not part of history. At a Starbucks in Cedarhurst last month, "Stonewall" was the answer to

the weekly trivia question for which you could win a free grande-sized drink, so I got to impress Lance, who's too ignorant and too straight and too young to know anything. Like Lance, Neo didn't exist in '69 – not even as a gleam in his salaryman father's eye. Jeez, I'm so old.

But it's not age that makes me want to nod off during this excruciating piece of shit. You'd think at least the rap part of it would keep me awake, if only because it'd be loud and annoying. But it's just boring.

Afterwards Neo will try to explain to me the “artist's” intent, like it hadn't already been hammered home as ploddingly as can be. Yeah, I got it: the performers – only two out of a dozen were actually black, by the way – were trying to show that in destroying neighborhoods to build the Cross-Bronx Expressway (a nightmare, but the best way to get to Jersey from the Island), Robert Moses inadvertently led to the creation of the first rap music and the hip-hop culture and all that. So? I don't hate all that hip-hop stuff Lance sometimes listens to in the truck. Rhyming “truth” with “F Troop” the way Ice Cube does is funny and clever.

*Moses/Grandwizard* is just pretentious. But then, what do I know? So I keep my trap shut in the café while Neo and his painfully cool friends rave over what we've just seen. To me, all it was was something I already know: in the end, it's all about real estate, money and power.

I never read that huge book about Robert Moses that my sister-in-law, a Democratic district leader in Little Neck, takes out on the beach every other summer and uses as her bible to gain whatever power she can grab. But I've picked up a few tidbits about Robert Moses from Marilyn, like how he made sure the overpasses on the Meadowbrook and Wantagh Parkways would be low enough so there wouldn't be headroom for buses, and therefore blacks and other poor people wouldn't be

coming out to Jones Beach and overrunning the pasty-faced, pale-bodied hordes. I never liked the beach all that much, though the first time I had sex it was at night on the beach at Riis Park.

Besides, I was four years old when Moses parted Williamsburg by destroying people's homes for the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, the cruddy highway Lance and I depend on to get to the North Shore. Of course, when I was 23, I stood with Mom and Dad and a whole lot of other people on the BQE by the Kosciuszko Bridge, blocking traffic to protest the eviction of all those Polish families in Northside when the S & S box factory wanted to expand.

The last time she was in the city from college, my niece Nikki asked if Neo and the hipsters he hangs with have ever heard my stories about what Mom and Dad and Granny did in the Seventies. How when the Puerto Ricans started moving in on Metropolitan Avenue and throwing garbage over the backyards next to ours on Conselyea Street, Mom and Dad started the block association. How instead of just being typical racists, they actually figured the best thing to do was help these people and start a day care center for the poor mothers – combined with a senior citizens center for the old Italian ladies in black, with a bocce court for the old men. How Dad was involved in working with the first black minister at Devoe Street Baptist and with the Hasidim on the community school board. How Mom used to go over to the Cooper Park project and hang out with all the black women activists there.

Nikki says she found something on the Internet from some grad student about how Mom and her friends – Italian, Polish, black, Puerto Rican – were “working class feminists.” I don't know about that, but I still get all this crappy mail from every liberal charity left over from the old days. Anyway, Nikki said Neo and his friends might

be interested in that stuff. Nah, I said, there's no irony in it.

Neo and I are in my king-sized bed. He's getting real comfortable here, and I don't mind having him around. Like I said, or should have, he's easy on the eyes. Whether he's an artist isn't for me to judge. I don't get Neo's installations or whatever they are. Give me a Warhol silkscreen of Jackie Onassis or Marilyn Monroe and I know that's art. I went over to that exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, the supposedly shocking one, and I found that some of the stuff was okay, even the Virgin Mary with elephant shit. I mean, if you didn't know it was elephant shit, you wouldn't have thought it was blasphemous. Shit is natural, it's everywhere, it's in you and me and Neo and Ralph and Marilyn and Lance and it was in my parents and grandparents and all the guys I partied with, fucked, drank with, the ones whose memorial services and funerals I cried at. Actually, that's an exaggeration – I was never much of a crier.

I get out of bed, go up the stairs of this old brownstone, past the third floor where Tina is sleeping after another day teaching those cute, annoying Hispanic second-graders – she had me visit the class one day, and what can I say, I'm a softie when it comes to kids. I've kept the top floor apartment unlocked since I kicked Drew out. This was my great-grandmother's apartment till she died at 99. The view of the Williamsburg Bridge and lower Manhattan is amazing, but even though Drew has been out for months, I haven't been able to make myself get over to the window to look. Till now.

Well, it's not so bad. If you don't think about how it happened, it's not so bad. It's like that fight I got into in junior high when Charlie Brancato knocked my tooth out. I kept running my tongue over the empty space because I

was so used to something being there. Not that my tooth was beautiful, and of course I could replace it with a cap.

My great-grandmother used to look out and say "*Che bella!*" or something similar. (I regret that I don't really know any Italian.) She lived to see them going up. Myself, I thought they were monstrous. But like a lot of monstrous things, you get fond of them if they hang around long enough.

Eventually I'll get used to their absence. The skyline looks better without them.

The only reason I can say I'm glad Mom and Dad died when they did is that they didn't have to experience 9/11. It was real estate, yeah, but it was people.

I could get maybe \$3000 in rent for this place. Of course, I'm not going to do that. Nikki wants to take her useless degree and go into publishing. At Marilyn's birthday party, Nikki said something about finding great writers who'll make great books, and I noticed Ralph's eyes rolling into the back of his head. Maybe Nikki wants to write a book herself one day, although I don't think she's got the cool factor down enough to get it published today.

She'll get paid peanuts to start. Most of those girls – it's always girls, I think, maybe some gay boys – who start as assistant to the assistant editor have to be subsidized with trust funds. Nikki could use a cheap apartment close to Manhattan. What could be better than to be young in the hippest neighborhood in New York? Of course, just saying "hippest" gives away my age and my utter lack of coolness or coolth or whatever term those people are using these days.

As I pad down two flights of stairs and get back under the covers, I think about the Japanese artist lying next me and how he could use that apartment, too. It's probably the only reason Neo's been hanging out with an old palooka like me.

I turn my head on the pillow, away from Neo, towards the windows facing Conselyea Street. I guess I'll find out whether Lance is right about Neo after I tell him my niece is getting the apartment her great-great-grandmother once lived in. If I were a cruder guy, I might say that blood is thicker than cum.

But I'm not quite that crude. And although it's really late, I'm going to wake up before 5:30 a.m. It's just as well. Lance will be here with the truck ninety minutes after that, and we've got to hurry up and get stuck in traffic.

I don't like to keep these people waiting. When the gates to your five-million-dollar home are screwed up, you want them fixed right away.



THE LOST MOVIE THEATERS OF SOUTHEASTERN  
BROOKLYN AND ROCKAWAY BEACH*The Rugby*

On Utica Avenue near Church Avenue, just blocks from our first apartment, the Rugby was the theater of my early childhood. When I was three, my mother took me to see my first film here. That weekday matinee of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* left me with one memory: a row of giant men so happy that they couldn't stop dancing.

My brother and I would spend Saturday mornings lining up under the Rugby's marquee with its unique saw-toothed top. During the scene in *West Side Story* where Rita Moreno slowly put on her stockings, Marc turned to me and said, "That's sexy." He was about seven.

By the time I was in college, the Rugby was showing porn films – a sure sign of impending death for one of "the nabs," what my family called neighborhood theaters. One Saturday night, when neither of us had a date and we had nothing better to do, Elise and I decided to see a triple-X feature at the Rugby. It had been her first movie theater too, the one where she'd watched Elvis movies like *Blue Hawaii*.

The only thing from that night I can remember is the entire screen being filled with a black man's penis becoming erect and Elise turning to me and saying, "This is the most disgusting movie I've ever seen." I nodded.

In place of the Rugby are several stores in the bustling shopping district of this Haitian neighborhood.

### *The Granada and The Carroll*

These were in opposite directions from The Rugby: the Carroll north on Utica in Crown Heights, the Granada west on Church in Flatbush. It was always a treat when Grandma Ethel and I would take the short bus ride to these theaters. We saw *Auntie Mame* for the second time at the Granada, months after she and Grandpa Herb had taken me to see it in Manhattan for Radio City's Christmas show. The day we saw *Tammy and the Doctor* at the Carroll, I found the first issue of *Green Lantern* at the used comic-book store next door afterwards.

The Carroll long ago became a liquor store, and the Granada a Pentecostal church.

### *The Brook and The Marine*

The closest movie theaters to the house we moved to when I was seven, these may have been an early experiment in twinning. Although they had separate entrances – the Marine on Flatbush Avenue, the Brook on Flatlands Avenue – the theaters were connected in the back. They were part of the Century chain, which ran many theaters in 1960s Brooklyn.

Starting in fourth grade, Eugene and I would go to Saturday morning double features at the Brook and the Marine. By junior high we had graduated from the children's section, patrolled by severe-looking matrons wielding flashlights, to the loge, where we watched what we thought were risqué comedies featuring some combination of Doris Day, Rock Hudson, Gina Lollobrigida, and Cary Grant – with Tony Randall and Thelma Ritter in supporting roles. The second feature always seemed to be a forgettable thriller with a love

story between a dark-haired Spanish woman and a character named Ramon.

When I was 18, I went to the Brook by myself on a school night to see my first X-rated movie, the exhilarating *Midnight Cowboy*. Also at the Brook, I had the embarrassing experience of seeing *What Do You Say to a Naked Lady?*, a film by *Candid Camera*'s Allan Funt, with my parents. Linda made the same mistake with her mother. We hadn't expected so much nudity.

The last time I went to the Marine, Stephen and I cut a college class to see a revival of *The Sound of Music*. I liked it better ten years before, when I'd seen it the first time with Eugene – also at the Marine.

The Brook and the Marine now house an insurance company and other offices.

### *The Seaview*

This was a small cinema in a strip shopping center in Canarsie, opening when Eugene and I were old enough to use the word *cinema*. We saw *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* here, and *Dr. Zhivago*. At fifteen, we were blown away by *Blow-Up* but confused by the mimes playing tennis without a ball at the end. It definitely was not Rock Hudson and Doris Day.

A couple of years later, I went alone to the Seaview to see *Wild in the Streets*, falling in love with the utter coolness of Christopher Jones as the rock star who becomes President when teens are allowed to vote. When I got home, I recounted the plot to my ten-year-old twin step-cousins, Alice and Bonnie, who stood open-mouthed as I described how Jones put everyone over 30 in concentration camps – even his mother, Shelley Winters, screaming as they led her away, “But I’m the biggest mother of them all!”

The Seaview is now just another store in a strip mall, and my twin step-cousins stopped talking to each other after Alice married Bonnie's ex-husband.

### *The Elm*

Like the Midwood, the Avalon, and the Avenue U, the Elm was near a stop of the Brighton line elevated tracks at East 16<sup>th</sup> Street. Another one of the Century's chain, it was a small art house and always played the same pictures as the Astor in Flatbush.

Here's where I saw a lot of foreign films like *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* and *Persona*. I usually went alone, but I saw John Cassavetes' *Faces* with a girl from group therapy after our session was over.

On Christmas Eve in 1969, my mother, brothers and cousins were in Florida for the holidays, and Dad and I had stayed behind because his mother, Grandma Sylvia, was having cancer surgery at New York Hospital. When Grandpa Nat called to say that everything was going to be all right, we went out in a snowstorm to see *Putney Swope* at the Elm. The director was credited as "Robert Downey (a prince)."

A few days later I was in swim trunks at the pool at the Carillon Hotel in Miami Beach when I saw Ronnie Dyson, a cute black actor my own age who'd been in the movie. Trying to be cool, I went over to him and said, "So is Robert Downey really a prince?" "Yeah, sure," he said, and walked away, leaving me feeling like an idiot.

For the first half of 1970 I would recite the lines from this movie that Downey made the actors repeat until they sounded inane, lines like "*Putney say the Bormann Six girl is got to have soul*" and "*How many syllables, Mario?*"

The Elm is now a bank.

### *The Nostrand*

In Marine Park, on Nostrand Avenue near Kings Highway, this was where my father dropped Marc and me off one Sunday afternoon to see *Dr. No*, the first James Bond movie.

In 1971, they ran classic movies here, a different one every day. Rona and I saw Greta Garbo in *Anna Karenina* at the Nostrand on a horrible afternoon when we were breaking up. We had a big argument after the movie and she took the bus home instead of riding in my car. I think at this time she was already secretly seeing my friend Richie H.

The Nostrand became a porn theater before it closed.

### *The College*

A small Art Deco movie house that seated only about 700, this was on Flatbush Avenue near Brooklyn College. A raised section in the back served as a kind of faux-balcony.

The College was where I saw the only movie I've ever walked out of in the middle: *True Grit*. I left not because of John Wayne's performance, but because I felt as if I were going to throw up.

I once went to a movie here with a bunch of gay friends from college: Stephen, Joe, Frank, and a couple of other guys. Mark M. was supposed to join us, but he canceled at the last minute, calling me to say he thought he was catching a cold. When I reported this, Stephen exclaimed, "What a pansy!" – which I thought was funny because Mark was straight.

The movie was awful, but we enjoyed chatting and making fun of it until a guy in front of us looked back and said, "Will you please shut up?"

"No," Stephen said, "we came here to talk and you'll just have to live with it."

The guy stood up and challenged Stephen to a fight outside. His girlfriend, embarrassed, tugged at the guy's arm. He looked about 6'6".

"Okay, we'll shut up," Stephen said quickly. "We didn't know you were that big." The rest of us tried to control our giggling as the guy sat down.

The College is now a West Indian restaurant.

### *The Georgetowne Twin*

In the Georgetowne shopping center not far from our house, this was the first suburban-type twin theater in Brooklyn. I attended the very first show here, at noon on a Friday afternoon in the summer of 1971. It was *Getting Straight*, with Elliott Gould playing a Vietnam vet in graduate school. The best scene was where he goes nuts when an English professor on his dissertation committee suggests that F. Scott Fitzgerald was gay.

My college girlfriends and I used to go to the movies here on Friday and Saturday night dates, but sometimes the lines got too long and we'd go instead to the Kings and the other empty movie palaces along Flatbush Avenue on what once had been called Brooklyn's Great White Way.

The Georgetowne Twin is now a Pergament hardware store.

### *The Kings*

The Kings was the grandest theater in Brooklyn: a French Renaissance palace whose lobby featured ornate chandeliers, bronze statues, and walnut paneling. Baroque murals with sinister satyr figures danced on the ceiling, and an ornamental peacock reigned above the stage. It was one of five “Wonder Theaters” that the Loews chain opened outside Manhattan in 1929.

In junior high, Eugene and I and the guys we hung out with would freeze our asses off waiting in long lines on Saturday mornings for the first showings of *Goldfinger* and *A Hard Day’s Night*.

In the early 1970s, as the neighborhood changed, white moviegoers abandoned the Kings and the other theaters on Flatbush Avenue for the newer twin theaters in shopping centers like Georgetowne and Kings Plaza. But Randi and I used to go here a lot, to avoid the Friday and Saturday night crowds at the suburban-like movie houses.

The last film we saw here was *The Tamarind Seed*, with Julie Andrews and Omar Sharif. We were practically the only white people in an audience of about a hundred, dwarfed in a theater meant to seat 3,500 people.

A documentary about the Kings appeared on PBS in the late 1980s and there always seems to be talk about reviving it now that the neighborhood has boomed again, saved by middle-class West Indians and Haitians. A deal for the Kings to reopen as part of the Magic Johnson chain fell through in the late 1990s because the theater was just too expensive to renovate.

The hulk of The Kings remains: shuttered except for occasional tours by select architecture and design

students. Some of them have spotted pigeons flying over the dusty, cobwebbed maroon seats in that blasted ruin, a Sistine Chapel for connoisseurs of decay.

*The Albemarle, The Rialto, The Kenmore  
and The Astor*

Except for the Astor, a small art house next to the 200-year-old Erasmus Hall High School, these theaters were the Kings' movie-palace neighbors along the five-block stretch of Flatbush Avenue south of Church.

The Kenmore, on Church Avenue, lasted the longest, becoming a quad. Linda and I saw *Grease* in one of the upstairs screening rooms, which had been the balcony where we'd sat as kids.

The Albemarle and the Rialto, a block apart, were only a little less grand than the Kings, each seating over 2,200 people. The last movies Linda and I saw here were both in 1974 – *The Towering Inferno* and *Earthquake* – but I can't remember in which theater we saw which disaster movie. Only a handful of people sat with us in the audience.

These theaters have become retail space – except for the Albemarle, which retains its marquee as a Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall.

*The Sheepshead*

On Sheepshead Bay Road, this small neighborhood house was where Elise and I saw *Trojan Women* here one Saturday night in February 1972 when we were both really depressed. Elise had just broken up with my friend Ken, and I was still bummed out over my breakup with Rona, whom I'd spotted the night before sitting with



Richie H. at the late show of *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* at the Kings Plaza theater. The Kings Plaza – now a quad – is still open.

Elise, a classics major, really liked *Trojan Women*. I was just grateful to be at the movies with someone I could relate to. The night before I'd seen *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* on a first date with a sorority girl who nearly gagged when Peter Finch kissed Murray Head.

When we got back into my car after *Trojan Women*, Elise and I couldn't stop shivering until the car heater came on full blast. She laughed when I said I used to be a Trojan man.

The Sheepshead became a roller rink before morphing into a Bally's Fitness health club.

### *The Avalon and The Kingsway*

These were along the Kings Highway shopping strip, the Kingsway a majestic Art Deco palace seating 2,200 at the corner of Coney Island Avenue, the Avalon a few streets down and a little smaller. The Avalon is where Elise and I saw *Cabaret* for the second time, a few months after we'd seen it at Manhattan's Ziegfeld Theater.

Once, when I was with Dad at the Avalon, the teenager in the aisle seat in front of us passed out during *Rocky II*. I was impressed that Dad, the first person to get to him, was quick enough to ask, "What are you on?" The kid said Quaaludes, but he was all right.

I went to the Kingsway just once, shortly before it was broken up into a multiplex, with someone who was not really my friend but Elise's. Jay's father had recently died and when I called to offer my condolences, he said he really needed to get out of the house and asked if I'd see a movie with him. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a

film with Paul Newman and Robby Benson in a strained father-son relationship.

When it opened, the Kingsway had an Austin Company pipe organ with three separate keyboards. Just a couple of years ago, it finally closed and became a Walgreens. The Avalon became retail stores catering to the Russians who dominate the neighborhood.

### *The Graham*

A little out-of-the-way theater in the isolated neighborhood of Gerritsen Beach, the Graham had a projection booth that was actually in the back of its lobby, from where you could watch the movie perfectly.

The Graham was a dollar theater when Elise and I went there to see our favorite actress, Glenda Jackson, in some comedy that we felt was beneath her. To us, a so-so Glenda Jackson movie was better than a good movie with a lesser actress.

The Graham was razed in the early 1990s. In its place are condominium apartments called The Graham.

### *The Midwood*

On Thanksgiving Eve 1972, I took Randi on our first date to the Midwood, on Avenue J and East 13<sup>th</sup> Street. She wore a blue turtleneck and had a bad cold, which I didn't worry about catching despite my hypochondria. Randi couldn't find tissues in the ladies' room, so she came back blowing her nose with those rough brown paper towels. I'd already seen Rohmer's talky *Chloe in the Afternoon* on my own in Manhattan, but I wanted to see it again because the narration was so fast I couldn't keep up with the subtitles the first time.

Walking on Avenue J after the show ended, I said I thought it was good for married people to have love affairs and Randi looked at me funny. We ended up dating for two years. I forced her to sit through *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* and she forced me to sit through a revival of *Camelot*, but we stayed friends anyway.

The Midwood became a discount theater, one where the price would end with the last two numbers of the year. In 1989, a ticket cost \$2.89. The Midwood shut down after someone got stabbed during a movie.

### *The Avenue U*

The Avenue U was at the corner of East 16<sup>th</sup> Street, shadowed by the el and just up the street from my orthodontist. When we were going to different high schools, Eugene and I saw some Biblical epic here on Easter vacation and he told me about this guy whom I suspected that he liked a lot.

On my thirtieth birthday in 1981, my parents were visiting from Florida and took me to dinner and my choice of movie. I chose John Waters' *Polyester* at the Avenue U. The cashier gave us Smell-o-rama cards with scratch-n-sniff odors like sweaty sneakers and shit. I waited to see how long it would be for my mother to figure out that Divine wasn't actually a woman. Mom had mostly stopped going to movies by then.

The Avenue U became a dollar theater and then a porn house before closing. It's now a Commerce Bank branch.

### *The Surfside Twin*

Another early 1970s strip-center twin theater, originally part of the Jerry Lewis Cinema chain, this was just a block from the beach at Rockaway, near the apartment buildings where my four grandparents lived.

When I told Grandpa Nat I'd seen *Across 110<sup>th</sup> Street* there, he said, "No, it's across 105<sup>th</sup> Street," referring to the theater's location across Beach 105<sup>th</sup> Street from his apartment. It was a funny "Who's on first?" conversation, but you had to be there.

By the time I was an MFA student, Grandma Sylvia spent winters in Miami Beach and Grandpa Nat joined her every third week. One Saturday afternoon when we were both alone, I convinced Grandpa Nat to accompany me to see a dubbed version of Bergman's *Scenes From a Marriage*.

At the scene in which Liv Ullman desperately claws at her unfaithful husband, Erland Josephsson, Grandpa Nat leaned across and whispered, "She loves him madly!" He and Grandma Sylvia had been married for about 55 years by then.

After the movie, we visited my other grandparents, who asked about the film. "This picture makes a big deal about nothing," Grandpa Nat told Grandma Ethel and Grandpa Herb. "It's not for people like us."

In the summer of 1991, just before I left New York to attend law school, I was living in Grandma Ethel's apartment. All my other grandparents were dead and she was in a nearby nursing home.

On my fortieth birthday, I tried to get Grandma Ethel to come with me to the Surfside to see *Boyz N the Hood*.

"Richard," she said, "my movie-going days are over." Then she wanted to know why I just didn't go two

doors down from the theater and bring back a movie from the video store.

“It’s not the same thing,” I said. I saw *Boyz N the Hood* alone.

The Surfside closed three years later, a few months after my grandmother died.

Driving by on Rockaway Beach Boulevard last summer, I couldn’t tell it had once been a movie theater.

## SHIRTLESS TEABAG-EATING WHITE BOYS

Before she had Alzheimer's, the TV was on at Jason's grandmother's house all day, mostly to CNN. She knew every news story when it first happened.

Now she can't watch TV anymore. Jason isn't sure why; maybe it's the Haldol she takes to stop her from being paranoid and psychotic and chasing his grandfather with a knife and saying he is stealing all her money and her jewelry.

Jason's grandmother can't remember things for long. Every time he comes over, she asks him if he is working. When he tells her he teaches middle school Spanish, she always says the same thing: "Do the students know you're Puerto Rican?" Sometimes he says yes; sometimes he says no. In a ninety-minute visit, she can ask these questions four or five times.

Jason's grandmother does know they are in Orlando. His aunt says eventually she won't.

Another thing she asks Jason all the time is if he likes Florida. He says it's okay, and she always says she wishes she could move back to New York, things were better there.

Jason has begun to bring his ThinkPad on his visits because his grandmother's attention span is good enough to look at things online.

He shows her scenes of Corona on the Forgotten New York website and she asks him what kind of people live there now. Jason's usual reply is "All kinds, I guess."

They watch videos on YouTube. She likes to watch a video of someone in a purple hippo suit dancing to reggaetón music and one of shirtless white boys eating teabags. Fifteen minutes later, she will forget she saw them.

Jason does not mind playing them again, though he much prefers the shirtless teabag-eating boys to the purple reggaetón hippo.

## THEY DON'T MAKE NOSTALGIA LIKE THEY USED TO

### *One*

Seven years old and dressed in a blue serge suit, I pose next to Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee, the chairman of the committee before which I have just given my testimony. Senator Kefauver looks drawn, pinched; he has been talking to me with that excess of heartiness I will later associate with politicians who have tried to become President and failed. I am sitting on the Senator's desk with my little legs dangling over its edge. The Kefauver committee is investigating TV quiz show scandals, and I am there to tell about my experiences trying out for the show *Take a Giant Step*, where my subject was to have been world capitals. The show's producers had offered to supply me with the correct answers but I had refused them because I knew I could win the grand prize – college scholarship money – legitimately. My grandfather, whose intent it had been to capitalize, as it were, on my geographic knowledge, looks pleased at the way events have turned out as he takes the photograph of me and Kefauver with his Kodak Brownie. Senator Hubert Humphrey is standing next to my grandfather as he clicks the shutter, the flash goes off, and I see a blue spot where Humphrey's head should be.

### *Two*

The old Kodachrome film, even when transferred to videotape, has that garish technicolor look of the early 1950s. Here I am even younger, three or four, and I am



barechested, wearing only boxer-style bathing trunks, grey socks and black Keds, and boxing gloves as big as my head. I am sitting on a stool at the corner of the boxing ring that my grandfather has set up outside the main building of his hotel. In another second the bell will sound – we don't hear it on the videotape – and I will gamely march to the center of the ring and flail my arms around the head and shoulders of my friend Bobby, who is doing approximately the same thing to me. The camera pans to the faces of laughing adults, then back to Bobby and me hitting each other as we were told to do. The cute part comes after the round is over and Bobby and I are shown with shaving cream over the parts of our faces that will one day grow beards, as we pretend to do a television commercial for Barbasol.

### *Three*

This videotape, also once film, has subtler colors. It is the end of the movie record of my bar mitzvah reception in the Flamingo Room of my grandfather's hotel. We have already seen numerous relatives – most of them dead now – dancing and drinking and eating. We have seen one guest's place setting, complete with food, appear on a table, utensil by utensil, course by course, in someone's idea of clever trick photography. We have seen the ice swans and the chopped liver chickens and me doing the rumba with my mother and my aunt. I am now just outside the Flamingo Room, the better of the hotel's two nightclubs, half-lying on a little couch as I pretend to be asleep and to be dreaming of scenes that appear above me, scenes of the reception that have already been shown. Allegedly I am dreaming about going under the limbo bar as my white yarmulke falls off, about being kissed simultaneously by four girls my age, about waltzing with

my frail great-grandmother. Watching this scene twenty years later, Bobby will tell me, "All night you kept saying to me, 'When is this going to be over? When is it going to end?'"

#### *Four*

I am seventeen, with my first girlfriend Judy, supposedly picking blueberries in the woods. We have agreed to do this for one of the cooks at the hotel, who wants to surprise Sunday breakfasters with fresh blueberry muffins. Judy is the daughter of the comedienne who appears most regularly at the hotel, a fat, boisterous, foul-mouthed woman best known for making jokes about her weight and ugliness on the Merv Griffin show. Actually, Judy's mother is not bad-looking for a large woman in her forties, and in the wedding portrait I have seen in Judy's house, her mother looks beautiful. Judy is incredibly pretty to me, and I can detect only the slightest hint of baby fat on her thighs. We are both wearing denim cutoffs, only Judy's are rolled up neatly as far as they will go, and mine are frayed badly at the ends, just above a triangle of mosquito bites on each of my legs. I am lying on top of her, there is a plaid woolen blanket under us – it scratches a little – and somehow things go a little further than usual and zippers get unzipped and suddenly I am saying, "Judy, do you realize what we're doing?" She sighs and says, "*Shut up, I don't want to know.*" A month later, we are making love in the mud at Woodstock, where the last night, stoned and too tired to think, I will tell Bobby – in front of Judy – about her "Shut up, I don't want to know" line. Bobby will put it in his mental file of odd things Judy has said, a file both Bobby and I refer to as "Judyisms." The last time I see Judy, she is with her husband and three-year-

old son at her mother's funeral at Frank E. Campbell in the city. Judy hugs me and says, "I knew you'd come, Mom always liked you because you loved to laugh at her."

### *Five*

Bobby is passing me a joint. The room smells more of the coconut incense that we bought from a Muslim on Eighth Street than it does of marijuana. I am lying on my back on the floor. Bobby is upside down in a well-upholstered chair, and we are passing the joint back and forth until it gets so small Bobby has to take out his roach clip. I hate to use roach clips and have made it a habit to stop smoking a joint before I need to use one, something Bobby is once again chiding me for. I am concentrating on the red glop oozing upward in the lava lamp. We are in Bobby's parents' apartment on Sutton Place, where we often go when the country becomes too oppressive. This afternoon, we took the Quickway down and came in through New Jersey, going straight to the Village, where we bought some posters and a whale's tooth at the Postermat and caught the incomprehensible *Duet for Cannibals* at the Eighth Street Playhouse. The phone rings, and while Bobby is talking in the other room, I remember my mother telling me in one of her rare moments of sobriety that Bobby's father wants to divorce his mother so that he can marry the very young wife of Blackie, the social director at my grandfather's hotel. Blackie is a nice old guy who has never failed to get me out in Simon Says. Bobby comes back into the room looking really angry and tells me he's going out. I find him an hour later in the rain, riding the statue of a boar that for some reason stands at the end of the block, its back to the river.

*Six*

My uncle is cursing his IBM PC-AT. I go behind his desk and see what the matter is. "I keep getting these damn syntax errors," my uncle says. "What are you trying to do?" "Clear the screen, of course." "The clearsreen command is CLS, not CS," I tell my uncle. "That doesn't make sense," he says. "Do you want me to do the work?" I ask. "Please," says my uncle, "you know I'll never get the hang of this thing." I call up the Lotus file of projected versus actual reservations for the just-completed Passover holidays; the numbers look very bad. After I print out a hardcopy, I put the computer back in DOS and try to call up another file my uncle wants to see. "Not ready error reading drive A," says the computer, "Abort, Retry, Ignore?" I retry a couple of times with the same result. "Abort already," says my uncle, standing behind me. I shut off the machine. "Can you imagine my father with one of these?" my uncle asks. I can, but I don't say so. Later I will attempt to classify the members of my family as one of three types, depending on which key they would hit: A for abort, R for retry, I for ignore. Obviously I am one of those who retry, and just as obviously, my uncle aborts. My mother is like her brother and would abort. But my grandfather, were he still alive, would hit the I key to ignore every time he got that not-ready error message.

*Seven*

In my uncle's private office there are many photographs of my grandfather with celebrities. My grandfather smiles next to a frowning Golda Meir. My

grandfather shakes hands with a too-hearty Governor Rockefeller. My grandfather stands with his arm around President Johnson, of whom he used to say that LBJ stood for a Little Bit Jewish – a joke he'd gotten from Judy's mother and repeated until we all wanted to scream when he'd tell it again. In another photograph my grandfather is handing Jerry Lewis a check for the muscular dystrophy telethon. There are some older sepia photographs of my great-grandmother and some long-forgotten politicians and entertainers. In the newer color photographs from the 1970s my uncle appears with Bill Cosby, Howard Cosell, and Sugar Ray Leonard, who once trained at the hotel. In my uncle's private office there are no photographs of me or my mother or my uncle's wife. My aunt and uncle had only one child, and he died very young of cystic fibrosis. There is one baby picture of my cousin, two years old or so, looking miserable in my grandfather's lap.

### *Eight*

Bobby and I drifted apart after I got serious about hotel management at Cornell and he got serious about heroin. For me, marijuana and then hash were pleasant diversions but not important; I never doubted I could live without them, and I haven't touched them since I was twenty-three and had a bad experience with some Maui wowie: I was convinced my heart was beating so fast it would explode and I rolled myself into a ball on the floor, afraid to move, even as my roommate tried to coax me out of this fetal position with a raw carrot, as if I were some kind of straw-hatted donkey. Bobby got hooked on smack after his parents' divorce and his father's marriage to Blackie's young wife. (Blackie died of a heart attack the day after my grandfather did; their funerals came on

the same day and my mother said she preferred to go to Blackie's.) Eventually Bobby cleaned up his act at Synanon and went into the army, where he had the good fortune to spend the worst days of the Vietnam War in peaceful West Germany, lecturing other soldiers about drug abuse. Bobby's parents' hotel was sold to the Mafia while he was away, in those few optimistic years when people thought casino gambling would come to the Catskills. When that never happened, the Mafia sold out to Swami Goptananda, who turned their nightclub into a temple where his followers held worship services and mass weddings. Somehow my mother fell in with the Swami for a while and claimed that she had found peace of mind at last – until some real estate deal Goptananda got her into went sour. Now she's in California with a florist shop and a guy younger than I am. Bobby lives in this old farm outside Fallsburg, next door to his ex-wife. After their kids left home, they ended up getting back together, sort of, living separately and singly. "It's so much better this way," Bobby has e-mailed me.

### *Nine*

"Every year I think, 'This is the year,'" my uncle used to say. "This is the year this place gets turned into a condominium." "It's demographics," I used to say, "demographics and changing times. You can't take it personally." "I'm my father's son," my uncle used to tell me, "so don't tell me not to take it personally." I knew my grandfather well enough to say nothing.

*Ten*

At three in the morning the Flamingo Room used to be very quiet. I'd sit at one of the front tables near the stage, a table where an elderly man died quietly during a Robert Klein monologue back in '70. Hearing about this in California, Judy's mother sent Klein a telegram that said **HEARD YOU KILLED EM AT LOU'S**. Lou was my grandfather, of course. Growing up, whenever I told someone about my relationship to him, I would always hear, "Of course, of course – everybody knows Lou." Once, when Bobby and I got picked up for reckless driving in Monticello, my grandfather raged at me, "I have an image to live up to!" He's been dead a very long time and he's probably still got an image in the Catskills. Myself, I left over 25 years ago. I didn't want to end up like my uncle. I sent my resumes to hotels in Florida and the Caribbean, using a post office box in town as my address, and after various misadventures eventually ended up here in St. Maarten, running a timeshare. At night, lying next to my third wife, I close my eyes and flash back on how it was before I left New York. As I wait for the Ambien to kick in, I can hear my stepdaughter's emo music playing in the next room.

TWO TOTALLY TRUE TALES  
FEATURING THE HONORABLE MINISTER LOUIS  
FARRAKHAN AS CUPID

*New York City, 1985*

In the fall of 1985, I was living at my friend Judd's apartment in Park Slope while he was in Reading, Pennsylvania, directing *Pippin* and other plays at a dinner theater. I took over Judd's bedroom on the fourth floor of a duplex apartment in a President Street brownstone.

Across the hall from me was the bedroom of one of Judd's roommates, Kenny, a thirtyish African American actor from Wisconsin. Downstairs, in what should have been the living room, was Judd's other roommate Kenny, a blond kid who'd just graduated Reed College and was trying to break into book publishing.

When my Great-Aunt Tillie invited me to have Rosh Hashana dinner at her apartment in Rockaway, she told me I could bring along my temporary roommates, too.

"What are their names?" Aunt Tillie asked me.

"Oh, they're both named Kenny," I said.

Aunt Tillie frowned. "Then how will I tell them apart?"

"Um, one's white and the other's black?" I said.

"Whew," Aunt Tillie said. "Lucky for me."

That term I was teaching remedial writing at two City University colleges in Manhattan, Baruch College and John Jay College of Criminal Justice. At the time, they wouldn't let us part-time teachers teach more than three courses at CUNY because then technically we'd be full-time employees eligible for benefits.

I needed to teach four classes to pay my bills, so at Baruch I taught under my real Social Security number



and at John Jay I taught under my Bizarro Social Security number with all the digits reversed. They never caught me.

That fall Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan was speaking at a huge rally at Madison Square Garden that had engendered a lot of controversy. Mayor Koch and other politicians and religious leaders accused Farrakhan of racism and anti-Semitism. Supposedly he'd called Judaism "a gutter religion" and Hitler "a great man," although he'd qualified that by adding "wickedly great." News has a kind of mystery.

One of my Baruch classes got into a big discussion about Farrakhan about a week before the rally. The class was pretty diverse, about one-third African American, one-third Hispanic (mostly Puerto Rican), one-third Asian (Chinese and Vietnamese/ethnic Chinese), along with a couple of Guyanese girls.

There were two African American students who didn't get along all semester. If Derrick took one position on an issue – like his preference for the serial comma in a list (to use my supposedly hilarious blackboard example: *raisin bran, oatmeal, and cornflakes*) – Sharon would take the opposite position.

If Jenny (Teh-Fang was her name on the roster) said that New Jersey was beautiful, Derrick would raise his hand to agree and then Sharon would raise her hand to argue with what Derrick had just said.

Derrick and Sharon would sit on opposite sides of the room and glare at each other.

Predictably, Derrick loved Farrakhan's message of self-help and self-determination, finding the minister a worthy successor to Malcolm X. I just nodded at his comments and mentioned that I had worked with Malcolm's widow, Dr. Betty Shabazz, when I had taught remedial writing at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn.

Sharon immediately raised her hand and said Derrick

was just showing his ignorance, that Farrakhan was a total fraud and his speeches just incited hatred.

Derrick yelled back before Sharon could finish her critique of him and Farrakhan, and then other students got involved and pretty soon the classroom was kind of out of control till a Puerto Rican kid, who'd been in the army, got everyone to shut up.

"Can we get back to subject/verb agreement?" Jenny (Teh-Fang) asked. She didn't like to waste an English class on talk about Farrakhan.

But I thought it was a teachable moment. I told Derrick and Sharon they should both go to Madison Square Garden to see Farrakhan and use their critical listening, thinking and writing skills to produce a report on the rally.

I never expected that they'd go together, but they did.

Derrick read his report on our next class following the rally. He found the rally electrifying and praised Farrakhan as a fount of wisdom and righteousness.

Sharon went next, although she wanted to talk her report rather than read it. "I still think he is messing with the black man's mind," she said of Farrakhan. "He did a lot of agitating."

She looked over at Derrick and smiled. "I do admit some of his ideas make a kind of sense, like raising ourselves by our bootstraps. But mostly it's just stupid rhetoric."

Derrick smiled back at her.

After that, they started sitting next to each other. They stopped disagreeing. They'd come in together and leave together.

And once I heard from the two elevator operators in our Baruch building – I didn't know their names, but from their job performance I thought of them as

“Whiplash Willie” and “Myrtle the Turtle” – that Derrick and Sharon were making out during elevator rides.

Both of them passed the CUNY Writing Assessment Test at the end of the semester and went on to regular freshman composition.

Judd returned from directing dinner theater in Pennsylvania and so I had to vacate his apartment. He told me he’d had “a little romance” with the actor who played the king in *Pippin*. Barry soon moved to Brooklyn to be with Judd and they’ve been together ever since.

At the end of that semester, I went to Florida to escape winter, mooch off my parents and teach some adjunct courses at Broward Community College. I never taught at Baruch College except for that one term.

I’d like to think that the little romance between Derrick and Sharon has lasted twenty years like Judd and Barry’s relationship, but somehow I doubt it.

Nevertheless, it’s nice to know they at least had a few months of love.

### *Gainesville, 1996*

Eleven years later, I was working as a staff attorney in social policy at the Center for Governmental Responsibility at the University of Florida law school. My salary was paid for by a grant from the state department of education because I was the legal consultant to an initiative called Schoolyear 2000. Mostly I researched legal issues in educational technology.

But I also got involved in other things the Center did. My supervisor Liz, the director of social policy and an expert in poverty law, ran the school’s Florida Bar

Foundation Public Interest Law Fellowship program and I helped her.

Every February we'd dress in business attire one week and interview the law students applying for the fellowship, which gave them a \$3,000 stipend to work at places like the public defender, the guardian ad litem agency, Three Rivers Legal Services, the Battered Women's Clemency Project and the Department of Environmental Protection.

Liz and I would pick eight to ten fellows each year, mostly on the basis of the pro bono and volunteer work they'd already done and their commitment to use their legal skills to help people who needed it.

Most of the fellows we selected were African American women because they tended to make up the majority of the students who applied.

Deirdre was one of our fellows for the 1996-97 academic year. A nurse, she had been in the army and was a Gulf War veteran. Deirdre did well academically and I got great reports on her from the supervising attorneys at Southern Legal Counsel.

In the fall of 1996, Minister Farrakhan was again in the news because of his planned Million Man March on Washington scheduled for mid-October.

I knew a couple of black men who had decided it was important for them to attend. My boyfriend Warren wasn't one of them. Warren said of Farrakhan, "I think he's full of shit."

I also knew that women were not really welcome at the Million Man March. Farrakhan suggested that women stay home, that the event was for the brothers only, because they were the ones who needed to hear what he was going to say.

Nevertheless, some women, Deirdre among them, decided that they wanted to go to Washington. "I think it's important for women to be there," she said when she

came to let me know that she would not be going into work or attending classes for a few days.

I could have said something about misogyny, sexism and homophobia but I didn't. When I wanted to lecture, I could do it to the students I taught English at the local community college in the evenings, after I got off work at the law school. And even then, I probably wouldn't have said anything; mostly I just let the students air their own views.

Anyway, I watched some of the March on TV. In some ways it was inspiring. But I found Farrakhan's speech laced not so much with hatred but with examples of fuzzy thinking and bizarre talk about esoteric numerology, Masonic conspiracies and musical scales.

As a (research) faculty member at a law school, I valued logic a lot more.

A few weeks after the rally, I attended a talk Deirdre and two other African American students who'd been in Washington gave about their experiences there. It sounded to me like a lot of positive stuff might come out of the Million Man March after all.

But it wasn't till Liz's annual Christmas party that I found out Deirdre's personal positive stuff that came out of the Million March March. She introduced me to Wade, her fiancé.

Deirdre and Wade had met in a hotel bar the evening before the march. He was a Jamaican-born real estate developer in Brooklyn. When I learned his last name, I knew it as that of a family prominent in borough politics and business. Wade was the only guy at the party in a business suit.

In the next few months, I'd hear that during his visits to Gainesville, he'd been scouting out property to buy and develop and that he'd made good connections with everyone in town who counted. A city commissioner I

knew was impressed that I was acquainted with Wade. "A quality fellow," she called him.

I was surprised to get an invitation to Deirdre and Wade's wedding that May. Deirdre was graduating from law school; after she took the bar exam, Deirdre and Wade were planning to divide their time between Gainesville and New York.

Since I hadn't been to a wedding for years and didn't have any idea what to get for a present, I gave Liz \$25 and told her to get something from both of us. She bought this beautiful multicolored ceramic vase.

The ceremony was on a Saturday afternoon in the lush gardens in the back of a historic Victorian inn on East University Avenue. Most of the African American elite of the town were present, along with some prominent white politicians and business leaders.

So were Deirdre's fellow Florida Bar Foundation Public Interest Law Fellows, her favorite professors, the attorneys from Southern Legal Counsel, Liz and me.

I didn't mist up during the ceremony, not even when Gainesville's only black female judge, a good friend of Liz's, pronounced Wade and Deirdre husband and wife.

But I thought it was lovely.

Although I was on a diet, I took a piece of wedding cake home.

That night I sat at my kitchen table and watched Warren eat it. He was painfully thin.

He listened to me tell him once again about the wedding, about Wade and Deirdre's fairy-tale romance.

"Romance is nice and the cake was delicious," Warren said. "But I still think Louis Farrakhan is full of shit."

We broke up two weeks later.

## BABYSITTING LAURENCE FISHBURNE

Whenever I used to hear NPR news items about the Mir space station, my first thought was that they were somehow trying to denigrate the Russians' technological accomplishments, so it was probably natural that when Ryan tells me at Gay Denny's that he's written a poem about Sam in Anthropology, I assume he means the store. Of course he means the class.

But it's 2:30 a.m. and I can barely understand anything more complicated than a Wallace and Gromit cartoon. Ryan and Sam live in the tiny guesthouse attached to my bungalow, but unfortunately they like to use me, the older gay man, as a parkerhouse roll model.

Memo to self: puns that rely on spelling changes don't work in stories.

Not that I mind them looking up to me, or looking at me sideways. I don't get looked at much in any way anymore, definitely not by guys their age. Tempus fugited so fast it seemed like one day I went to bed looking like Chip and woke up the next morning looking like Uncle Charley. And there's no one around to tell me, "That's the stupidest thing you said since the last stupid thing you said."

Ryan and Sam come the closest to being around – come on knock on their door, they've been waiting for me – so when he hands me the poem, I move away my Boca burger and fries and my coffee cup. Ryan looks up from his plate of French slam (freedom toast, two eggs, two strips of bacon, two sausage links) as I stare at the piece of folded-up, college-ruled notebook paper, three holes on the side and fringes on the left side of the torn-off page.

I put on my reading glasses and see:

*I watch you lay  
In bed right there  
Flaunting puffy eyes  
And scattered hair*

*For you this look  
Works well it seems  
No, you're always cute  
Which is why I can't help but stare*

*You are right beside me,  
My right hand man  
My best friend and accomplice  
In neverending misadventures*

*You've never had to stay  
But you did  
You're the one who loved me,  
The one who cared*

"I know that's a little crappy," Ryan says, "but whatever, I'm not a poet, I just like pretty words." Ryan's choirboy good looks are appealing but not television-pretty. He's got the kind of face that could trick you into thinking he's about to say something like "Dude, let's play hackysack."

I don't know what to say about Ryan's honey-roasted sentimentality.

Years ago, I did my time in that rag-and-bone shop of the heart, the American MFA industry. But my workshops were in fiction, not poetry, in a program in which genre-mixing was not encouraged, and even though I was a TA in Intro to Creative Writing, I was always more comfortable commenting on the standard vignette-type story in which reality was mediated by



language rather than fully explained, told with flat diction and simple vocabulary.

Ryan's vocabulary is pretty simple, simpler than you'd expect from a guy who on his best days gets annoyed with Sam for not knowing who Amartya Sen is and not wanting to spend time discussing oil-based economies. On the other hand, when Sam suggested he read *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Ryan went to the Phoenix public library and took out *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* instead.

But this is what love is: it turns smart boys into morons. Should I tell start off by telling him it's *lie*, not *lay*? No, that was never worth getting into, even when you were teaching remedial. I can't tell Ryan his writing puts the *b* back in subtle, either.

Ryan is a red-haired ex-Mormon boy from Payson who belongs to Delta Lambda Phi, Arizona State's gay fraternity. He works for the school's Youth Care program, passing out condoms and leaflets on safe sex and the perils of Ecstasy. Three nights a week he works in the convenience store at the 76 gas station down 7<sup>th</sup> Street, at MacDowell – a job that will make a nice anecdote at Ryan's planned presentation at Davos 2030.

Sam is Ryan's first boyfriend. Ryan once told me that he believed in using the Powell Doctrine in a relationship: you go at it with overwhelming force or not at all.

Sam is half-Mexican, half-Jewish, with two moms. He dyes his natural brown hair black and he's got a tribal tattoo of an eye on his upper back between his shoulder blades. Sam's obsessive drawings of buff boys being devoured by salacious-looking Venus flytraps are too Henry Darger for me. His major is Interdisciplinary Studies, his AOL screenname was VeggieBoi83, and two nights ago, when Ryan was studying late in Hayden

Library, I saw Sam go into the guesthouse with a walking bottle of creatine who was wearing a wifebeater.

I suspect Craigslist at work, but it's not my beeswax, any more than is critiquing this thing Ryan calls a poem.

So I nod, and I say, "It's not so bad. I like the *flaunting puffy eyes* and the word *neverending*."

Ryan's face falls a bit. I'm a little loopy with the lateness of the hour – also with knowing it's still about 85 degrees outside the restaurant. After five years in Phoenix, I still feel like a fish out of water. Maybe I'm a fish getting spritzed regularly, but a brown concrete desert is not my natural habitat. I'm stalling, I know.

Tricks are for kids. So I say, "It's tragically fabulous," and Ryan perks up. How

He looks a little like the Elongated Man, my favorite superhero, mainly because his secret identity was known to everyone and he seemed to do nothing back in the Sixties except travel from one glamorous location to another with his wife, sit in posh restaurants, and solve mysteries. I liked the fact that his superpower came from a soft drink. Also, I used to imagine the positions he could stretch himself into.

My position with Ryan right now is untenable, a word I'm sure Ryan knows but Sam probably doesn't. Then I feel guilty for thinking badly of Ryan's right hand man and accomplice and I say, "Sam's a really good person."

"Yeah," Ryan says. "At least he seems to be."

And I take a sip of coffee that lasts long enough for Ryan to sigh and go on: "If he's not, I give him mad respect for being such a talented actor."

I like to impress the young'uns by telling them that I once babysat Laurence Fishburne. This is not quite true, but it's true enough. When I was 20 I had an English professor back in New York, an elderly black man who wore Panama hats. Professor Jarrett was the godfather to

this kid around 12 named Larry Fishburne, who was on the soap *One Life to Live*.

One day the professor brought the boy on campus. While the prof taught a class on Victorian literature, he had me take Larry out to the Sugar Bowl for fifty minutes.

Larry Fishburne was a pretty cool kid. I'd never watched *OLTL*, only started many years later when I was out of work and switching channels and came across a scene between this blond boy about 15 and a priest and couldn't believe I was hearing the kid tell the priest that he'd slept with another boy at camp "but it was just a summer thing." That gay-teen plotline had me hooked for a while (the kid became Ryan Phillippe) but when we had lime rickeys back in the early Seventies, I had never seen Larry on TV.

A couple of years later he'd go to the Philippines for *Apocalypse Now*, and then he'd be playing the father of a teenager in *Boyz n the Hood* and Ike Turner and Morpheus, and I started telling people I had babysat Laurence Fishburne.

Better to make yourself sound older than you are because you look old enough eventually.

And eventually you get so old you can't let Sam get away with saying he's *not disinterested* when he means *not uninterested*, as I tell antiwar stories about New York in the Seventies and Eighties.

Mopping up the last chunk of French toast, Ryan is thinking about Sam now. Ryan's crooked grin suddenly reminds me less of the Elongated Man and more of Lyle the Crocodile from *The House on East 88<sup>th</sup> Street*. I used to live on West 85<sup>th</sup> Street, disinterested observers will want to know.

The only thing I remember from acting classes – aside from the fact that I was no Laurence Fishburne –

was Stanislavsky saying there are no bit parts, only bit actors.

I know about Sam's Creatine Boy and Sam's Glitter Boy and the cute Chinese one who loves *Willy Wonka and The Chocolate Factory*, The Smiths and Save Ferris, stuff I learned in the backyard when we were searching for his lost cell phone and Sam kept saying, "This fucking sucks really bad."

Sam plays Ryan like a theremin, but I'm just Fred Mertz. What stops any fantasies about embedding myself with them is the knowledge that they couldn't look at me while we were doing it and I couldn't look at them afterwards.

What I *can* do is read Ryan's poetic tribute to Sam and lie with a straight face. In short stories it's hard to fight the urge toward the redemptive.

"It's really really late for me," I tell Ryan. That's no lie, although it's probably as redundant as *pizza pie* or *bento box*.

As I pay the check at Gay Denny's, tip the tranny waitress 25%, and prepare to go out into the midsummer 3 a.m. heat, I know that when Ryan and I go home, Sam won't be there because he's at Crowbar.

But before Ryan goes into the guesthouse and finds that out, he'll say good night to me with the words, "Keep it real."

And I'll think, "Yeah, right."

Ryan reads Harry Potter books without knowing he's just deciphering code on a white page.

So just after I think, "Yeah, right," Ryan's eyes will meet mine for just a moment.

That moment will be long enough to ponder the conundrum of why our longings usually end in acts of self-sabotage before the phrase "*ponder the conundrum*" results in yet another cliché: a middle-aged man, neither paternal nor avuncular, slapping his own forehead.

## MELISSA AND THE GOOD LEGISLATOR

In the fall of 1993 I was wearing a bulletproof vest in Gainesville, Florida. I had volunteered to be an escort at our town's women's health resource center and I was holding hands with a teenage girl as we walked through a line of pro-life demonstrators yelling at us.

A Florida obstetrician-gynecologist and another escort had been shot to death in Pensacola earlier that year.

I was doing this because... well, partly because I had a crush on the black lesbian who ran the women's health resource center, someone with whom I served on the board of directors of the Human Rights Council of North Central Florida. (At times I am not a very good homosexual.)

But it was also because of something that happened when I was impossibly young. I got Melissa's mom pregnant.

It was 1971 and we didn't know what we were doing. We were college kids and she was barely 18 and it felt like love for both of us. What did we know? We were both Mensa members who'd read a book by Masters and Johnson and yet the only birth control we used at first was withdrawal.

But lucky for me and Melissa's mom, there was Assemblyman George M. Michaels.

A Democrat, Mr. Michaels represented a largely rural, mostly conservative and heavily Roman Catholic constituency in the Finger Lakes region of west-central New York. He authored the bill that made the bluebird the official state bird.

In 1970 legislation was introduced in New York to allow abortion in the first 24 weeks of pregnancy if a woman and her doctor agreed to it.

Melissa's mom and I didn't pay any attention to it at the time. We didn't even know each other then. I was a freshman at Brooklyn College and she was a senior at James Madison High School. I was going to antiwar marches and she was starring as Snoopy in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*.

It was three years before *Roe v. Wade*. New York had a Republican governor and a Republican-controlled state legislature.

Of the 207 legislators, just four were women.

I met Melissa's mom at a New Year's Eve party in Trump Village in Coney Island. She was a freshman and I was a sophomore.

Melissa's mom had long blonde hair and a crooked smile and a cute scar on her nose, from the time her crazy uncle threw a Coke bottle at her. She wore a granny dress and smelled like lilacs.

Around 11 p.m., we went into our host's 13-year-old brother's bedroom. Just before 1970 ended, I was going to kiss a girl, *really* kiss a girl, for the first time.

By 1970, a few states had carved limited exceptions out of what was essentially a nationwide ban on abortion. Hawaii had approved the nation's first broad legalization, but it applied only to Hawaii residents. The proposed New York law went further because it had no residency requirement.

It was snowing that New Year's Eve, and Melissa's mom and I watched the flakes fall on Trump Village – named for the father, not the son – from a window in a kid's bedroom on the eighteenth floor.

Because of the snowstorm, we had to spend the night at the apartment with a bunch of other kids who were at

the party. At first I was concerned because I didn't have my antidepressant medication, but I forgot about that as I lay on the floor next to Melissa's mom.

There weren't enough pillows for everyone, so we had to share a folded-over towel to rest our heads on. We slept in our clothes, taking off only our shoes. I had white athletic socks on.

Assemblyman Michaels personally favored a woman's right to choose but in previous terms had voted twice against legalizing abortion at the behest of the Cayuga County Democratic Committee.

He did so again on April 1, 1970 when the bill went down to a narrow defeat.

By April 1971, I had been seeing Melissa's mom for months. I hadn't been around girls much and she was a virgin and we stumbled into things together. It seemed real natural at the time.

Her parents both worked and her sister was always off at her music lessons and we spent most afternoons in her bedroom. I learned how to unclasp a bra and take a girl's barrettes from her long blonde hair and put them on her dresser.

She once said to me, "When you take off your glasses, that's how I know you mean business."

I laughed and decided not to tell her I didn't like the word *business* used to refer to what we were doing.

From Melissa's mom, I learned about the pain some girls had when they got their periods and also what happened when they didn't.

In the New York State Assembly, some Democratic legislators brought up the abortion bill for reconsideration on April 9, 1970.

It needed 76 votes to pass, a clear majority of the 150-member Assembly.

When the roll call was finished, the count ended at 74 to 74.

One Assemblyman was absent. Speaker Perry B. Duryea Jr., a Long Island Republican, did not vote, in keeping with the tradition that the speaker votes only if it affects the outcome.

Melissa's mom and I used to fight a lot, but we also made up quickly, usually in bed.

She could infuriate me, and then she'd make me laugh. Like when she'd pick up her sister's guitar and strum it, singing this stupid song she made up:

*I loved my horse,  
My horse loved me.  
Had to send him  
To the glue factory.  
Poor horse...  
I miss my horse.  
Poor horse...  
He's dead, of course.*

During the roll call, Assemblyman Michaels had been thinking of his family's Passover seder the night before and what his son and daughter-in-law had told him.

Before the clerk could bring the vote to a close, Mr. Michaels stood and asked to be recognized. At first he rambled, his voice thick and trembling, and it was unclear where he was going.

But heads turned when he said, "My constituents will condemn me for what I am about to do."

I told Melissa's mom it would be all right. We made an appointment at Planned Parenthood in downtown



Brooklyn, and I got up early one September morning – it was the first real autumn day – and I put on the jeans she'd bleached for me, the ones on which she'd put a daisy appliqué on the right knee.

She was really nervous. Planned Parenthood was on the fourth floor of 44 Court Street, the same building where I'd been to plead my case to my draft board when they classified me 1-A.

So on the sixth floor of that building there was a file that listed me as a homosexual and thereby unfit for military service and on the fourth floor I found myself the only boy in a room of teenage girls, munching on plain donuts and listening to a nurse from Planned Parenthood tell us about birth control.

She said she was always glad to see a boy come there.

On the first floor of 44 Court Street was a Zum Zum, part of a chain of fake German fast food restaurants. I told Melissa's mom we'd get bratwurst and sauerkraut there when our appointment with Planned Parenthood was over.

Assemblyman Michaels rose to take the microphone, his hands trembling.

"I realize, Mr. Speaker, that I am terminating my political career, but I cannot in good conscience sit here and allow my vote to be the one that defeats this bill," he said. Then he started to cry.

By September 1971 Melissa's mom and I had done a lot of crying.

At Planned Parenthood, I stayed behind in the waiting room trying to read an episode of "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" in *McCall's Magazine* while she was being examined by a handsome young black gynecologist.

He helped us a lot.

Assemblyman Michaels tried to compose himself.

"My oldest son just called me a whore for the vote I cast against this," Mr. Michaels said. "He said, 'Dad, for God's sake, don't let your vote be the vote that defeats this bill.'"

"I ask that my vote be changed from 'no' to 'yes.' "

"I fully appreciate that this is the termination of my political career," the assemblyman said. "But Mr. Speaker, I must have some peace in my family. And I therefore request you, Mr. Speaker, to change my negative vote to an affirmative vote."

He crumpled into his seat and buried his face in his hands as bedlam swallowed the chamber. Someone screamed curses at him. An assemblyman from Manhattan came over and kissed his forehead.

Speaker Duryea then cast the final "aye" vote, making it 76 to 73.

The next day, the Senate passed the Assembly version of the bill.

The day after that, April 11, 1970, Governor Rockefeller signed it into law. "The wives of the Senate and the Assembly put this bill through," he said.

Exactly a year and a half later, early in the morning of October 11, 1971, I took Melissa's mom to Coney Island Hospital.

This part you're not going to believe, so you might as well just pretend I'm making it up: I borrowed money for the abortion from a Roman Catholic priest.

I'd met Bud answering his ad in *The East Village Other* personals when I was 17 and he was 22 and in the seminary. Bud was crazy about me, but I was really scared of sex and said I wasn't ready.

Bud thought I was messed up, but he was a good guy. He'd had a bad experience with a priest himself when he was younger, and that's why he said he would only get involved with non-Catholic boys like me who wouldn't know him as a priest.

We remained friends. Just before I met Melissa's mom, Bud had introduced me to the 17-year-old Jewish boy he was seeing.

I think Bud thought abortion was wrong, but he lent me the money anyway. I paid him back in a few months from my salary at Alexander's Department Store in Kings Plaza.

Assemblyman Michaels sought a sixth term in 1970, but the Cayuga County Democratic Committee denied him renomination and he lost the June primary in a four-way race.

"I was just a small country lawyer," Mr. Michaels said about his decision. "I found myself caught up in something bigger than I was."

Melissa's mom and I also got caught up in something bigger than we were. So did the teenage girl back in Gainesville ten years ago. I squeezed her hand when someone called her a baby-killer. She squeezed mine back.

A few months after our baby would have been born, Melissa's mom left me for another guy, someone I'd considered a friend.

Her new boyfriend actually came to my house and offered to reimburse me for the three months' supply of birth control pills I'd paid for at Planned Parenthood.

I told him I didn't want my money back. I was hurt and angry about our breakup but I wasn't that low. With

my friend Mark M., I'd worked to get a staff gynecologist for the female students at Brooklyn College.

It shocked me when Melissa's mom married her new boyfriend a few months after that day he came to my house. It was sudden, but it wasn't because of a pregnancy.

They were married for three years and didn't have any kids. Later her husband would live in Brooklyn Heights with his boyfriend.

I served as a legislator, sort of, one year. While I was going for my M.A. in English, I represented Richmond College on Staten Island in the City University of New York Student Senate. I was elected unanimously because no one else wanted to run for the office.

On the fourth Sunday of every month I'd drive to Upper East Side for University Student Senate meetings with Mark M., who was the senator representing Brooklyn College that year.

We never had any really tough decisions to make.

Melissa's mom left New York and finally stopped going with gay guys. In 1979 she married an older man who had his own business. Unfortunately, very soon afterwards he had a stroke and died.

The third time was the charm for her. In San Diego she met Melissa's dad. They were emotionally mature and financially stable when their baby was born in 1988.

Assemblyman Michaels was 80 when he died in 1992. His oldest son, who had become a rabbi, delivered the eulogy at his funeral.

I got in touch with Melissa's mom again when I lived in Gainesville and worked for gay rights and volunteered

at the women's health resource center. She'd send me pictures of Melissa with her annual Christmas card.

I asked Melissa's mom if she still made up silly songs like the one about the dead horse. She said she left that to her sister. But then she told me about one she'd made up during the Iran hostage crisis, around the time her second husband died:

*In the holy city of Qom  
When a boy loves a girl  
He says "Zum Zum"  
Zum Zum, Zum Zum,  
Zum Zum, Zum Zum,  
Zum Zum, Zum Zum.*

I thought about the German fast food place at 44 Court Street and told her she should sing that song to her daughter.

Eventually Melissa's mom stopped answering my e-mails. I think she got upset with something I had written.

People change and times change. You know that 13-year-old boy in whose bedroom Melissa's mom and I first kissed? He and his husband live in Boston with their two kids.

I wonder what Assemblyman Michaels would have thought of *that*.

I've seen a recent photo of Melissa on the website of her aunt, a well-known folksinger I'm sure you've heard of.

Melissa is about the age her mom was when I first knew her.

Melissa has brunette hair in a pixie cut, but her face resembles her mom's a lot. Just as pretty, but without a nose scar caused by some crazy uncle.

Every once in a long while I think about what it would be like to be the father of someone in their thirties.

I really can't imagine it. Warren, my ex-boyfriend, is in his thirties.

Both Bud and Melissa's mom's first husband died in their thirties, of AIDS. I went to their funerals. They were human beings, not fetuses. I think there's a big difference.

Warren argues with me about this. He is pro-life.

My doctor – who is, believe it or not, the sister of Mark M.'s daughter-in-law – tells me it's not good for my blood pressure to argue with Warren.

That's probably why I've never told him about Melissa or her mom or Assemblyman George M. Michaels.

Maybe someday I will.

## 69 REASONS TO DATE MY AUNT AISHA

When *One Tree Hill* is on, she will not come into your room, look at the TV, look at you lying on the floor and say, “What are you watching *that* for?”

She always has freshly-shaved armpits without the slightest trace of underarm hair.

Alluring lips.

She can teach you a lot of words you wouldn’t ordinarily use but which will probably improve your score on the verbal part of the SAT.

Not a bathroom hog.

She can stick out her tongue further than anyone I know, a very interesting trait that runs in our family, ha ha.

If you arrested for DUI, she can defend you and probably keep you out of jail.

Once you know her, you can’t stay away from her.

Sexy lips.

She is extremely liberal.

She hates a lot of the same things you do about some of the things Rev. What’s-his-name at the Wesley Street AME Zion Church says in his sermons.

Can explain why the stations on the 7 train have names like Bliss Street along with 46<sup>th</sup> Street.

Can be sarcastic but in a really random way, like when she makes of fun of your liking Black Eyed Peas.

If you are at Borders and too embarrassed to go to the counter with a copy of *XY Magazine*, she will buy it for you if you give her the money. She will keep the change.

Beguiling lips.

If given the choice between Taye Diggs and Mos Def, she would pick the same one you would.

Excellent hair.

Moist lips.

A birthmark on the little toe of her right foot that is adorable.

She will say of *your* birthmark, "It's hardly noticeable."

She is active in the St. Johns University law school alumni association.

She can tell you what to order in an Ethiopian restaurant and how to scoop up the stew with the spongy stuff so other people don't think you're there for the first time.

She may let you bite her on the ass like she did me (once).

She doesn't get drunk too often. Hardly ever.



Bee-stung lips.

When you get punched in the eye, she will offer to sue the person who did it but tell you not to bother because the bruise makes you look tough and sexy.

She will never call you Skinny or Beanpole.

The way she will run her tongue over her sexy, alluring, beguiling lips.

If she sees you smoking, she won't say anything, just give you that look.

If you are in the bathroom in the middle of the afternoon, she will not rush you to get out unless she has diarrhea.

If it's your birthday, she will give you a card in the morning before work and another one when she comes home later. Also a decent present.

If muggers take your iPod, she will buy you a new one, no questions asked.

If your grandfather is on your case, she will tell him to lighten up.

Succulent lips.

On Saturday mornings in October if she is not too busy, she will drive you to the beach so you don't have to take the Q-53 bus.

She will even park on Beach 90<sup>th</sup> so you can watch the surfers in their wetsuits.

Some of the surfers will come over because they want to talk to her and they will have to make conversation with you also.

If you don't have a brown Rockaway Beach Surf Shop T-shirt, she will lend you the money to get one but then forget about it (the money, not the shirt).

Vixenish lips.

Not too buxom.

Her head is normally shaped for someone from our family.

She has read a lot of good books and will recommend some of them, some of which you will like (*Waiting to Exhale*), some of which you won't (*The World According to Garp*) even though she thought it would be just the opposite.

Man, can she dance.

Gotta-die-for lips.

Kissable lips.

Scrumptious lips.

One-of-a-kind lips.

Lovable lips.

She will kiss you like no one else has!!!

All her diplomas and plaques are impressive.

Her MySpace page is impressive even if she let you make it for her and she will hardly use it.

Can really tell someone off without resorting to saying “fuck you” or something really vulgar like that.

If your grandfather is on your back about something, she will at least make an effort to get him off even though it may not work.

Sensuous lips.

She knows the difference between “sensuous” and “sensual.”

Also can explain when to put an apostrophe on “its.”

She will sit with you and watch *Gravitation* anime music videos on YouTube until she has to go do some work.

She is a worthy successor to Johnny Cochran as a defense attorney.

The Legal Aid Society would be lost without her.

You would be lost without her.

When you meet her, you won't know what hit you.

When you meet her, it will seem like the first day of your life.

When you meet her, you will wonder why you waited so long to date her.

When you meet her, she will be understanding if you like Eminem.

Those lips!

That smile!

She will make sure you treat her the way she deserves to be treated.

If you don't treat certain of her relatives nicely, or if you make any kind of disparaging remark about them at all, or if you just kind of ignore them and hope they will go away, she will – though not in so many words or in so vulgar a way – tell you to fuck off.

## SEVEN MEN WHO MADE ME HAPPY

*Michael Argyle, a psychologist at Oxford University, has found some common threads [to happiness]. Money, he says, makes little difference to happiness, except for people who are very poor. People on the job are happiest when they have good relationships with co-workers and when part of their day is spent "wasting time, fooling around, and sharing gossip and jokes," he said. And for some reason, watching soap operas on television makes people happy ("I think they've got imaginary friends there," he said.)*

-- "Looking for Happiness? It May Be Very Near; When the Heart Sings, Part of the Cortex Gets Busy" by Pam Belluck, *The New York Times*, July 24, 1999

*Wallingford on Another World (Brent Collins)*

*Another World* was my all-time favorite daytime drama. My best friend Eugene and I would race home from junior high to catch the last fifteen minutes of the show, which was then shot live at the NBC studios not far from our neighborhood in Brooklyn. When Nina and I watched the final episode in her house on Long Island on June 25, 1999, her husband Tony couldn't understand we were saying goodbye to people we had loved for years. There were many characters in Bay City that I could tell you stories about, but the one that provided me with the most joy appeared for less than four years, starting in 1984.

Wallingford couldn't have been more than four feet tall, and he started out as a minor character, a somewhat

shady figure. With his tiny misshapen body and head, he projected a confidence and a good sense of humor. I was staying with Nina on West 85<sup>th</sup> Street in those years, sleeping on her living room floor on a futon I'd drag out from the closet every night. We taped the shows and would watch it as we sat on her bed, eating cold sesame noodles from Szechuan Broadway or vanilla Haagen-Dazs from the container.

Wallingford was a loyal friend to the glamorous Felicia Gallant, romance novelist and owner of the *soigné* Tops Restaurant, and her pal, playboy lawyer Cass Winthrop. The three of them got involved in all sorts of capers, like the time they had to dress up as nuns or when, to pay off a gambling debt, they had to turn the mobster Tony the Tuna's vulgar teenage niece into a classy debutante.

Brent Collins, who played Wallingford, died suddenly of a heart attack in real life. A few weeks later on *Another World*, Cass went up to the room in the boarding house where Wallingford lived and discovered that he'd died of a heart attack too. Even the rich people in town who barely knew Wallingford – it was never clear if that was his first or last name – came to his memorial service, and they played clips of his funniest moments. Sometimes I used to think that Nina and I had a friendship like the one Wallingford and Felicia had, but we were never so witty and we never had to sneak into some nasty rich woman's estate to plant evidence that would make her appear to be a dangerous criminal.

### *Billy Douglas on One Life to Live (Ryan Phillippe)*

Living in Gainesville, Florida, in the summer of 1992, I had just finished my first year of law school and I was so poor that I ate horrible Budget Gourmet frozen

entrees every night for dinner. It was the first summer I couldn't afford to go to New York, and all my classmates were a lot younger than I was, and I didn't really have any friends.

Without cable, I couldn't get the NBC or CBS stations from Jacksonville and I missed old favorites like *Another World* and *As the World Turns*. One afternoon I turned on ABC's *One Life to Live* and was startled to hear a blond teenage boy tell his minister about an affair he'd had with another boy the previous summer.

Ryan Phillippe played Billy Douglas in a storyline about homophobia. People in Llanview apparently had never dealt with a gay teenage boy, and a jealous girl accused him and Rev. Carpenter of messing around. Billy's father hated him for being gay, but somehow Billy managed to get through a gay-bashing, a suicide attempt, and other traumas. His best friend Joey and Joey's girlfriend stuck by him, as did the minister.

I'll never forget the scene when Mr. Douglas was about to slap Billy across the face when crusty General Carpenter grabbed Mr. Douglas's hand to stop him. Years before General Carpenter had rejected his own son, who died of AIDS, but seeing what was happening to Billy made him call up his dead son's boyfriend and invite him to town.

Billy's mother divorced Mr. Douglas, who then left town. I would have hated him for being so homophobic, but years before Nina and I had seen the actor playing him in *As Is*, the first Broadway play about AIDS, in the role of a dying gay man.

Billy never had an onscreen boyfriend, and eventually his storyline petered out to his being the loyal friend of several people in town, including the girl who had once made up the rumors about him and the minister.

By the fall of 1992, I was back taking classes. I had student loans, a scholarship, and two part-time jobs.

Thanks to Billy Douglas, I had gotten through that summer.

*Bruce Sterling on Love of Life (Ron Tomme)*

When I started Brooklyn College in the fall of 1969 after spending nearly a year in the house due to agoraphobia, my classes all began after 2 p.m. I'd wake up around 10:30 a.m., do my homework, and then at 11:30 a.m. *Love of Life* would come on CBS. Ron Tomme played Bruce Sterling. Years later Michael Dukakis would remind me of Bruce Sterling: that same small-framed, dark-haired, mild-mannered style.

Bruce was far from being the most interesting character in the upstate New York town where *Love of Life* was set. When I started watching the show, Bruce was in his mid-forties, married to Vanessa, the father of two adult children by his dead first wife. What was unique about Bruce was that he was such a cipher that the writers kept trying to make him interesting by having him change careers often, going from being a history teacher to an executive at his father-in-law's lumber company to a newspaper editor to the headmaster of a private school to dean of admissions and the acting president at a state university to the town's mayor.

He and Vanessa got divorced when her first husband turned up, not dead after all, and he married a not-so-nice Australian woman. Mobsters pissed off by his anti-crime crusading ran him down with a car, and he was in a wheelchair for a while.

Bruce wasn't a cheerful person, and he didn't seem all that friendly, and he was kind of distant with his grown kids. But you could tell he was decent, and he clearly could adapt to new situations. Years after *Love of Life* was canceled and replaced with a sexier, more



glamorous soap, I remembered Bruce Sterling as I went from being a community college English teacher to a computer software trainer to a lawyer.

*Dr. Miles Cavanaugh on The Edge of Night*  
(Joel Crothers)

Nina's friend Barbara, our neighbor at 350 West 85<sup>th</sup> Street, knew the actor Joel Crothers, who played Miles Cavanaugh on *The Edge of Night* from 1977 to its last show in 1984. Miles first appeared as the doctor of Nicole Drake, a pregnant grieving widow.

Miles was married to Denise, one of the most evil characters I can remember from daytime TV – and I've seen a lot of villains. Denise, played by the delicious Holland Taylor, suspected that Miles – a handsome younger man with a dark mustache – harbored strong feelings for his patient Nicole, and Denise plotted to destroy them both.

After many schemes failed, Denise finally decided to pretend to come down with an incurable disease to keep Miles married to her. She persuaded her father, Gus, a rich doctor who bankrolled Miles' clinic, to fake the test results that would show she had this horrible rare condition that would kill her.

In an incredible irony, it turned out that Denise actually did have this very disease and was dying, and when she found out, she figured she could commit suicide and frame Miles for her death, so he'd get the electric chair. But somehow Miles' sister April got sent to prison instead. Eventually Gus confessed that he'd killed his daughter to end her suffering.

Miles did marry Nicole, but a few years later she died bizarrely, from poisoned makeup. Miles became a special forensics consultant for the Monticello Police

Department although he mostly ended up being falsely accused of various crimes: the attempted rape of a patient, the bludgeoning of a nurse, and the strangling of his friend Nora.

Miles struggled with alcoholism, and after being drugged by Nola Madison, he suffered from hallucinations and schizophrenic symptoms for a few months. But he always managed to come back looking as debonair as ever.

*The Edge of Night* ended the last week of December 1984, when I was living at Nina's and just about to return to Florida to start graduate school in computer education. Just at the end Miles marries psychiatrist Beth Carruthers, and on the last show they are in bed together. Beth says, "This is going to last forever," and Miles says, "Yes, it is," as they go to the final commercial.

The next November, I was back at Nina's apartment when Barbara called to tell us that Joel Carothers had died of AIDS. A lot of men we knew were dying in those years, like our other neighbor and friend Chris Bernau, who played the villainous Alan Spaulding on *The Guiding Light*, a show I never watched.

### *Grandpa Hughes on As the World Turns* (Santos Ortega)

As I a kid, I was sick a lot, and when I stayed home from school, I would watch this classic old-fashioned soap whose signature scene was two people having coffee in the kitchen and discussing family problems. It was one such scene between Grandpa Hughes and his daughter-in-law Nancy, herself the grandmother of a teenager, that was interrupted that Friday in November when I stayed home from eighth grade with a mild cold.

One minute Grandpa was reassuring Nancy that everything was going to turn out all right and the next Walter Cronkite in his shirtsleeves was telling us that President Kennedy had been shot.

Grandpa, an unsophisticated good-hearted farmer played by Santos Ortega since the show had been on radio, was on *As the World Turns* till I was 25. He even got married again, to his neighbor Mrs. Konicki.

I remember him most fondly comforting a small crying boy, the illegitimate half-brother of his great-grandson. My own great-grandfather was a mean-spirited millionaire who never liked me, and I was glad when he died. When Grandpa Hughes passed away, I felt a lot worse.

### *Blackie Parrish on General Hospital (John Stamos)*

I never was able to get into *General Hospital* until the summer of 1982, when I was living in Florida and worked in the mornings and evenings. I was having an affair with John, who'd just graduated from high school and loved the show. He'd come over to my rented condo in Sunrise Golf Village around 1 p.m. every weekday and we'd stay in the king-sized bed for hours.

At 3 p.m. he always wanted to watch *General Hospital*. "Do I have a choice?" I'd say, totally in love with him, and he'd reply, "Yes, we can watch it on channel 10 or channel 12, whichever you want." John was referring to the Miami and West Palm Beach ABC affiliates.

While developing a waterfront sports center, Dr. Rick Webber (portrayed by the actor famous for his "I'm not a doctor but I play one on TV" commercial) befriended Blackie Parrish, a street-smart ex-gang

member played by John Stamos, and eventually Rick and his wife Leslie adopted him.

Blackie was cool, with his shaggy black hair, and like John, he looked good in his boxers. He wasn't as tough as he appeared, and he charmed the Port Arthur kids and old folks alike. He even got the morose Luke Spencer, who then thought his love Laura was dead, to laugh when Blackie would tell him tall stories.

The weird storylines about nefarious plots by villains intent on world domination were ludicrous to me, but soaps had changed, and John was mesmerized by these stories. I'd tease him about it and he teased me about liking old-fashioned shows like his mother did. Although I was 30 and John was 17, his mom was older than mine. My mother never watched a soap opera in her life, and neither did *her* mother.

When John went away to college that fall, I kept watching *General Hospital* for a couple of years, till I moved back to New York. Blackie reminded me of John although Blackie was an aspiring rock musician and John wanted to be a chemical engineer.

As stardom beckoned, Blackie started to ignore his family, friends and his girlfriend Lou, a foul-mouthed runaway he'd turned into a lovely young woman. Eventually Lou found evidence that Blackie was stealing songs from his bandmate Frisco Jones and showed him the tape that was the proof of his theft of intellectual property. They struggled for the tape, and in a freak accident, Lou hit her head on the furniture and died.

Blackie felt so guilty and realized what a creep he had become that although he could have defended himself, he took the blame and was sent to jail for involuntary manslaughter. It was clear that John Stamos was becoming too big a star and was heading for primetime.

By then it was two years later, the summer of 1984, and I lost contact with my John. Nina asked me to apartment-sit for her in Manhattan while she was in Europe for a month and I ended up staying on West 85<sup>th</sup> Street off and on for six years. In New York I never watched *General Hospital* once.

*Dr. Nick Bellini on The Doctors (Gerald Gordon)*

When I began watching *The Doctors*, I was a disturbed teen coping with panic attacks that made every day at school a horrible ordeal.

Nick Bellini, one of the few Italian-American soap characters, was a hotheaded neurosurgeon who was always doing something unorthodox. Despite his tenderness toward his longtime lover, Dr. Althea Gibson, Nick was brusque, temperamental, and had no patience for red tape. His friend Dr. Matt Powers, the chief of staff, sometimes dressed him down but Matt knew that Nick was invaluable and he always let him get away with things.

There were a lot of surgery scenes at the beginning, but eventually Nick got obsessed with work in his laboratory, where he had a loyal young woman as his assistant. Contrary to all known medical wisdom, Nick believed that schizophrenia was not caused by bad parents or a weird upbringing but by a problem in people's brains. Everyone thought Nick was crazy, but Matt let him go on with his experiments because when needed in emergency brain surgery, there was no doctor better than Nick.

I started seeing a psychiatrist for my panic attacks around the time Nick came on the show. My doctor was an elderly Freudian and basically let me talk. Sometimes he'd fall asleep on me and I was too embarrassed to say

anything. Supposedly we were going to get to the root of my problems, some event in my childhood or the way I was brought up by Mom and Dad that would explain why several times a day I'd get incredibly nauseous and start to shake and my heart would pound and I would feel an impending sense of doom and that I needed to get out of that classroom or subway car or movie theater as soon as possible or I'd explode.

I never did learn anything that made me better. I talked about my homosexual feelings, about my mother's over-protectiveness, about my father's coldness, about my toilet training or what I could remember it, but the anxiety just kept getting worse and worse till it got to the point, after I managed to graduate high school, where I couldn't leave the house at all.

By the winter of 1969, it was hard for me even to leave my little bedroom, where I'd get five or six bad panic attacks a day. I stopped sleeping. Finally one day I couldn't stop shaking and didn't believe I could make it through the half-hour between 1:30 and 2:00 p.m. despite the calming presence of *As the World Turns*. Mom called Dr. Lippman and demanded that he prescribe some medicine. He was reluctant, but Mom insisted, and that night I got started on an antidepressant.

Six weeks later I started going out and wandering further every day till by summer I was taking the subway to Manhattan to hang out in the Village, going to plays, starting college, making friends, working in political campaigns, staying out late. The panic attacks lessened and gradually faded away. It was the medicine. Nick Bellini had been right.

The problem had all been in my brain.

Although my social life got a lot better in college, I still liked to look in and see what Nick was doing on *The Doctors*. He got calmer and less volatile as he got older,

and eventually he became a mentor to younger hotheaded doctors like his nephew Dr. Rico Bellini.

When I was 25 and teaching college English and starting to publish my stories in little magazines, Nick was written off the show. I owed him a lot of happy afternoons.

## SCHMUCK BROTHERS OF EAST HARLEM

So we're just walking past Murray's Sturgeon Shop when my new friend Shira Finkelstein asks me if I'd let her photograph me kissing her boyfriend.

"No way," I say. "I've got my own boyfriend, thanks." I take my wallet out of my jeans, and behind my Washington Mutual debit card I dig out a pic of Adam and me in front of the Golden Gate Bridge. "And you can see how fine he is," I tell her.

She looks and nods. "Um. He's okay."

"More than okay," I tell her as I stuff my wallet back into my pocket and pick up the pace on Broadway.

"He looks like Will Smith," Shira Finkelstein says.

"So? Will Smith's cute," I say.

"But he's, like, *old*," she says.

"Huh," I say. "It's not like he needs the Depends aisle in Duane Reade." Then I ask Shira Finkelstein how old *her* boyfriend is.

"Seventeen," she says as we turn left at 95<sup>th</sup> Street and go past the Leonard Nimoy Thalia Theater.

"*What?*" I say. "You're robbing the cradle. You're, like, how much older than him?"

Shira Finkelstein sighs. She likes younger guys, she tells me, and then she goes into this whole spiel about Adonises and shit like that. Then, just as we get to the door of her building on West End Avenue, she says, "I just have this thing about watching two guys kiss. You wouldn't have to even take your clothes off for the photo. Although if you wore something sleeveless, I could get your tattoo in."

I keep shaking my head. "I have no interest in chicken," I tell her.



"I want this," she tells me. "You haven't known me that long, but by now you must know I'm used to getting what I want."

I just can't get why she wants it.

"Um, I *need* it. Kind of an aphrodisiac, you know? Boys understand that, don't they?"

"Man," I tell Shira Finkelstein, "you're awfully kinky for a *frum* chick."

"I'm not *frum*," she protests. "I'm faux-*frum*."

We've just walked up from 85<sup>th</sup> Street, where we had dinner at the Kashbah Kosher Café, above whose doorway is a big picture of Rabbi Schneerson hunched over the Torah, one hand upraised. Under the picture it says in big letters *WELCOME MOSHIACH*.

The Kashbah Kosher Café's logo is a bull and on their awning is this quote: "Bulls will then be offered." And under it: "Psalms 5:21."

Of course immediately after dinner, we did go across the street to Victoria's Secret, where Shira Finkelstein asked me to approve her two purchases.

I met Shira Finkelstein at a photography class at Cooper Union. She came right after me in the class roster, Finkelstein following Finch. The teacher made us partners on a first night assignment and we hit it off.

I haven't told her, and don't plan to, that my family name used to be the same as hers till my grandfather read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She'd just try to figure out if we're cousins or something.

At first I thought she thought I might be boyfriend material. I don't know why but I guess that thought flattered me, so I figured I'd let it play out for a while.

But the first time we saw each other outside of class, we were walking on 86<sup>th</sup> Street near Lex when I got a sudden craving for Tasti D-Lite. She didn't want any –

maybe because it's not kosher – and after I'd finished it and thrown away my empty cup and the napkin and plastic spoon, she looked straight at me.

"Do you realize that anyone watching you eat even a single *bite* of that ice cream would know in half a second that you're gay?" Shira Finkelstein said.

I might have blushed. "It's not really ice cream," I told her.

Adam doesn't want to hear about Shira Finkelstein and her desires.

He works on Wall Street, in an extremely important position, so he's very tense.

Before he came out, when he was in his early twenties, Adam actually was married to a Jewish woman he met in college. And he converted and everything, to please her family even though he kept imagining her grandparents would never be able to look at him and not think *schvartze*.

That was a long, long time ago, but Adam never bothered to convert back. So technically he's still Jewish. To me, he's like the God of the Old Testament, always laying down rules. And since I live in his condo, I basically go along with him. Sometimes it's hard, because he always comes home from work really stressed.

"This girl sounds like a fucking nutjob," Adam tells me before he turns out the lamp on his side of the bed. "I really would stay away from her if I were you."

Although the room is now dark, I need to get out of bed because my Estée Lauder Stress Relief Eye Mask is still on. I've told Adam that the aloe and cucumber in it would do him a world of good, but he won't listen.

So for a week I ignore Shira Finkelstein when I see her number on my cell phone. She keeps calling, and I do like her, and finally she starts texting me. But I feel she's presuming on our budding friendship so I decide not to answer her about the photo with her boyfriend till I get this message:

*i'll pay u 4 yr time!*

I call Shira Finkelstein and we meet at the Starbucks on 95<sup>th</sup> Street near her house.

"Does your boyfriend even *want* to kiss another guy?" I ask her after we sit down with our frappuccinos. "I mean, is he bi?"

She waves her hand, flashing these wonderful sparkly light green nails, courtesy of Hard Candy Vintage Nail Polish's classic Tantrum.

"He'll do anything I ask," Shira Finkelstein says.

"I guess," I say, "if he's seventeen." My mom used to play a song about a girl being seventeen.

Shira Finkelstein says, "Is a hundred dollars enough? It really shouldn't take more than an hour."

"Fine," I say.

I'm not doing it for the money. Well, I *am* doing it for the money, but not for the particular sum. What I mean is, oh, I'm such a Mary Ann, and this gives me the chance to do something transgressive – although it's not something I'm going to brag about to my friends who've done *actual* interesting boundary-crossing shit.

Shira Finkelstein excuses herself and goes back to the counter. I assume she's ordering a reduced-fat muffin or maybe those madeleines she likes and I don't, but when she comes back, she's empty-handed and tells me, "Igor says it's do-able."

"What?"

She points to the barista, who's working at the espresso machine. He's a tall, rangy white kid with long blondish hair pushed back above his pierced ears, making

him look slightly like Jar Jar Binks. He's got pale skin with a sprinkling of acne above his unibrow. You can tell he has been trying to grow sideburns but can't. Yech.

"That's your boyfriend?" I say.

Shira Finkelstein smiles and nods, lifting her eyebrows high enough so that I can tell she's wearing Urban Decay's Maui Wowie eyeshadow.

I make sure to break the news to Adam when he's in a good mood, so I give him the SparkNotes version, without too much critical exegesis, over dinner at his favorite restaurant, Café des Artistes.

For Adam, he takes it pretty well. I guess he's pleased because he knows I would never hide anything from him or lie to him.

Of course, I always make the mistake of going one step too far. After I take the last bite of my rack of lamb with herb crust and tomato fondue, I say, "It will be an interesting experience, don't you think? I mean, it's just an innocent photograph."

"This innocent photograph, what's she gonna call it?" Adam says with a snort. "Schmuck Brothers of East Harlem?"

Schmuck Brothers is an actual store on 125<sup>th</sup> Street east of Third Avenue, though technically they are the Schmuck Brothers of Pennsylvania, Antique Liquidators Since 1929. Adam and I discovered it on one of our long walks uptown. We both like to walk, although we've been doing less of it lately. He's got a lot of work at the office. More stress.

If Adam had used the Cellcomet Anti-Stress Cream Mask I'd bought him last week, the clay in it would have exfoliated and detoxified his skin. And the orange flower and rosewater in it would have calmed him down a little,

maybe enough so that he could appreciate this romantic atmosphere.

But no. Instead we sit in silence as the frolicking nude wood nymphs in the murals look on.

Before the photo shoot, Shira Finkelstein thinks Igor and I should get to know each other a little, so we all meet for dinner downtown at Cooper 35, across from the school. I think her observance of the kosher dietary rules only holds north of 14<sup>th</sup> Street. We sit outside and I have a beer with my cold sesame noodles.

Igor, who looks at my Molson longingly, picks at his salmon. He does not have good table manners. I wonder who paid for his Blue Cult jeans.

"It's such a beautiful evening," Shira Finkelstein says.

Igor just stares at her, nodding. He must really like to have sex with her.

"Why don't you give Igor a sip of your beer?" she asks me. "You know, to break the ice. At least get your lips on the same glass."

"Sure," I say, handing the glass to the kid, wondering if he'd be interested in the number of my manicurist. Igor has a cuticle problem.

He takes a healthy sip of the beer, then another.

"Aren't we contributing to the delinquency of a minor?" I ask Shira Finkelstein.

She sighs. "I've been doing that for four months now."

Igor smiles at me. "You think she is like Humbert Humbert?"

There's a mouthful of cold sesame noodles about to enter my mouth, so I wait till I chew and swallow thoroughly and put down my chopsticks and pat my lips with my napkin. It's given me time to come up with a

Jewish response: “Do *you* think she’s like Humbert Humbert?”

Igor smiles again. “No, I think she is like Lolita herself,” he says.

Even though Adam told me he’d be at work till maybe midnight, I’d hoped the evening of bonding with Igor would end early. But Shira Finkelstein’s parents have gone to Sagaponack for the weekend and she wants to rent a movie at Kim’s and watch it, the three of us, at home. So I follow her there, in a less puppy-dog manner than Igor does.

I always get bamboozled in video stores, overwhelmed by the choices. But tonight I decide early on that I’m going to hold out for *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*. Igor wants to see *Women in Love* – not many people know that Larry Kramer wrote the screenplay – but I definitely am not into either Glenda Jackson or nude wrestling. Of course we end up with the choice of Shira Finkelstein – *The Dreamers* – which neither Igor nor I am happy about.

Still, it’s not about *our* happiness, is it?

While waiting for the subway uptown, we’re standing in front of a poster for Con Edison. *New York’s Best Street Performers Don’t Mime, Juggle or Do Standup*, it says, with the small print touting the skills of its repair and maintenance crews. There are photos of various Con Ed workers and above one of a female hardhat fixing something halfway under the sidewalk, someone has graffitied this thought balloon:

*I would make twice as much money if I were a Ho.*

Inside the subway car we get on, two teenage boys a little younger than Igor are b-boying to a boom box with

a littler kid of maybe nine or ten. They're all wearing black and their breaking is pretty good but not spectacular. I'd say okay footwork and spinning but they can't freeze for shit. Then again, a moving train isn't exactly solid ground. I think of getting out my cell to take a quick picture but decide against it.

As we exit to transfer at the Times Square stop, Shira Finkelstein hands the shorty a twenty-dollar bill.

"I assume you wrote your cell number on it so he can call you for a date," I say as we walk to the 1/2/3 tracks. When Igor laughs at this, she elbows him in the ribs. He pretends he's hurt and stumbles around, bumping into a Latino woman with a baby in a stroller.

"*Perdóname*," Igor says to her. At least he's polite.

But when we get out at 96<sup>th</sup> Street, I tell Shira Finkelstein I don't really want to watch a movie.

"Me neither," Igor says. The peanut gallery has spoken.

Shira Finkelstein doesn't look dismayed. "Well, if you guys are both nervous, why don't we just get it over with? Come up and I'll shoot you and it will be all over in a little while and you can just pretend it was all a dream or something."

"I've got a headache," I say.

"Headaches are what my mom uses for birth control," Shira Finkelstein says, and Igor laughs.

"Oh fuck, why not?" I say. "But if I had known beforehand, I really would have put on more product tonight."

This is probably going to be like sitting through the worst Cat Power show ever.

I try to call Adam to tell him I'm going through with it and will be home in a couple of hours – everything

needs to be transparent here – but he’s probably still at his meeting because he’s not picking up.

We’re going to sit on the living room sectional, Shira Finkelstein tells us as she fiddles with her expensive camera, a birthday gift from her grandfather. Before we went to the current show at MOMA, she was under the misapprehension that Lee Friedlander was a woman.

We don’t have to, but she’d really appreciate it if we’d put on the wifebeaters she’d got for us at Tar-zhay. Before I say anything, Igor’s already peeled off his Pixies T-shirt, so I figure I’ll play along too and start unbuttoning my polo shirt.

Igor seems as surprised by the tacky Star of David that Adam bought for me at Jewelrymaven.com as I am that he’s wearing a *mezzuzah*. I think we’re both embarrassed.

I talk when I’m embarrassed so I say, “I just have it so that any terrorists who capture me will know to torture me a lot before they kill me. Also it’s from my boyfriend. What’s your excuse?”

He shrugs, points to Shira Finkelstein. “Dunno, she tortures me enough.”

She looks up from her photographic equipment long enough to say, “How sweet, look at all you boys have in common. I bet you’re both circumcised.” She motions to the body art he’s got on his right upper arm and the Celtic-symbol tattoo on my left shoulder. “And neither of you can be buried properly. You might just as well start smooching now.”

Igor sniffs. “Wet yet?” he asks her.

I’m not close enough to him yet, but I *hope* he uses deodorant – even if it’s Mitchum.

My own fragrance tonight is Demeter’s worn-leathery Riding Crop.



“It’s showtime, kids,” Shira Finkelstein tells us.

I’m real worried that the night has gotten away from me and Adam will be wondering where I am, but when I let myself into the apartment, he isn’t even back yet himself. What a relief.

Not that I have anything to feel guilty about, not really. Kissing Igor was not as gross as I expected although as we got close for the first shot, I had to offer him an Altoid.

I understand now what movie actors go through. It actually is kind of uncomfortable when someone photographs two people kissing. You never realize that usually your noses are being squished together in a manner that looks altogether unattractive on camera.

And I didn’t expect it to take that long, but Igor unexpectedly got a case of the giggles that was totally contagious. It was involuntary, but it frustrated Shira Finkelstein. Every time our lips would get closer and closer, one or both of us would start laughing again, ruining the shot.

Igor’s a decent kid. I think he must care about her a lot to do what he did, because I don’t think he’s bi at all. They were probably having incredible sex after I left for the East Side.

I kind of got a little excited myself, which is why I’m hoping Adam gets back any minute. He’s been so tired lately that I can’t remember the last time we kissed, much less fucked.

But I’m pretty much asleep when Adam comes in our bedroom. “It’s okay, I’m not asleep,” I tell him, knowing he’s been trying not to wake me.

I sit up in bed and move to kiss him. I get just the corner of his lip. "It's late," he says.

"I need to tell you everything that happened with Shira Finkelstein and her boyfriend tonight," I say. "Emphasis on *boy*, by the way."

Adam doesn't say anything.

"I'm so glad you're home," I tell him. His response is a sigh.

And then, rousing myself fully, I recount everything that happened, not the SparkNotes version this time but the whole *megillah*, including every feeling I had with Igor. If I'm totally honest, Adam can't hold it against me.

Maybe it's just that he wants to go to sleep, but he seems bored by my story. Or maybe it's Adam being passive-aggressive as usual.

"Are you upset?" I ask him. "It didn't mean anything."

His fingers dawdle on the bedcover and he says, "Tyler, I think you should start looking for another place to live."

"Huh?" I say. "Because of this stupid photography thing? Adam, it was a big nothing. You think I give a shit about this icky little boy or his stupid girlfriend? I'm sorry. I wouldn't have done it at all if you'd absolutely said no, but in the end it seemed like you didn't care."

He tells me this isn't about Igor or anything related to it, that not everything is about me, this is about him. He's met someone, he's been seeing someone, he hasn't known how to tell me but it's getting...

While Adam is talking, I'm thinking but not saying, *You're always working, when do you have time to see anyone*, till it hits me what an asshole I've been. And then I say aloud, "I'm not going to make a scene..."

Adam notes that technically to "make a scene" I'd have to be with him in a public place and we're in his

bedroom. And then I *do* make a scene. When it's over, my throat hurts a lot and my eyes are so red and puffy that not a single Kiehl's product could make them look normal again.

Adam won't tell me about the guy he's in love with, if he's younger or older than me, if he's smarter or funnier, what his body is like, what sex with him is like – Adam says it'll just make me more unhappy, and that he's sorry he made me this unhappy already.

Towards daylight I realize that I'd better play on his guilt, since basically that's all I've got going for me now. I should never have agreed to pose for those pictures. I want them destroyed.

When I meet Shira Finkelstein at the Union Square Café on a muggy Tuesday over a week later, she gives me not only the check for a hundred dollars but also “a bonus for being such a good sport”: a bar of certified-organic, cruelty-free hand soap infused with grapefruit seed extract. I bet it's from The Body Shop and she's just placed it in a Sephora bag to soften me up.

“I got some lip gloss there for myself,” she lies, puckering. “Vincent Longo's Baci XXX.”

Inside her Birkin handbag is another plastic shopping bag, this one from the St. Mark's Bookshop. “And this is from Igor,” she says. “Well, I paid for it, but he was the one who picked it out.”

It's a copy of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. I look inside for an inscription, maybe something similar to the text messages Igor's been sending me: *i m bored, wanna hang out?* But there's nothing personal in it.

“Well, thank you so much,” I tell Shira Finkelstein. “And thank Igor for me.”

“Thank you,” she says. “You’re a good friend. You knew this meant a lot to me, and you didn’t want to do it, but you did it to make me happy.”

“So are you happy?” I ask her.

Leaning over and kissing me on the cheek, Shira Finkelstein says she’s *always* happy. Today she also reeks of way too much Ralph Lauren Blue.

I don’t say anything.

“Igor’s happy, too.”

“Good,” I say.

Shira Finkelstein clears her throat. “So how’s Adam these days?”

“Oh, he’s very happy,” I tell her. I’m being honest, after all.

She nods. And leans closer. “Well, just between you, me and the wallpaper: if you weren’t such a Boy Scout with your relationship with Adam – which, by the way, I think is totally sweet and beautiful – I think Igor might be interested in some boy-on-boy action.”

She waits for my response but finally says, “You know, I wouldn’t mind it in the least.”

“Mm-hm,” I say, “especially if you could videotape it.”

Shira Finkelstein laughs. Then she says: “Are you in, homigo?”

I shrug. “It depends.”

I really have other things on my mind, like finding a new place to live and getting funding to continue my education.

If only Igor were older and didn’t work at Starbucks. Still, if I insisted, she’d probably pay to get his eyebrows waxed.

Oh what the hell. “All my base are belong to you,” I tell her.

I lift my glass of white wine and motion for her to do the same. Technically, we're north of 14<sup>th</sup> Street, but what's a block or two among friends?

*"L'chaim,"* I say as we clink wineglasses.

This lunch, like all our meals together, is going to be Shira Finkelstein's treat.

THREE SCENES FROM MY LIFE  
(WITH SPECIAL GUEST STAR  
TRUMAN CAPOTE)

*West 89<sup>th</sup> Street off Central Park West,  
Wednesday, April 6, 1966*

I am in the office of Dr. M.C. Spahn, headmaster of The Franklin School and former All-America basketball player for CCNY in the 1930s. Students refer to his office as “the cigar box” because of the wood paneling everywhere. I am sitting in a leather chair, all 103 pounds of me, thinking that the office doesn’t at all resemble one of my Grandpa Nat’s Havatampa cigar boxes.

My heart is beating fast. The buttons on my Franklin School blue blazer are open. I’ve got on a pale blue Drip-Dry button-down shirt and a red-and-brown rep tie as well as one of the worsted slacks Grandpa Nat and my father manufacture in the garment center, 70 blocks to the south. My loafers are black. My blond hair is parted on the side, and on the other side it flops down my forehead just the way my Grandpa Herb said his hair used to when he was my age, which is 14.

“I don’t know what to do with you,” Dr. Spahn says. There are basketball trophies and other awards on the bookcases behind me.

I had transferred to this private school in October because I hated my public high school back in Brooklyn, where I lived. I had few friends there and didn’t like having to swim in the nude every day, which was a rule for boys in New York City public school pools. Now, unhappy with the 90-minute commute home (AA train from 88<sup>th</sup> Street to 59<sup>th</sup> Street; D train from 59<sup>th</sup> Street to

34<sup>th</sup> Street; Q train from 34<sup>th</sup> Street to Kings Highway; Mill Basin bus to two blocks from our house in Brooklyn), I want to transfer again, to another public high school in Brooklyn, but one with no pool and with some of my friends from junior high.

In just six months I have caused Dr. Spahn a lot of trouble.

"I can remember a boy here who also was unhappy, just like you," Dr. Spahn says. "His name was Truman Capote. You remind me of him."

Then he says he wants my father to come up to see him the next day and dismisses me with a sigh.

As I walk downstairs to Mrs. Youman's Literature class and a discussion of Racine's *Phaedra*, I wonder if Dr. Spahn knows I want to be a writer.

*In Cold Blood* has been number one on the best-seller list for weeks.

*East 58<sup>th</sup> Street off Church Avenue, Brooklyn,  
Saturday, March 13, 1971*

I am parked in my mother's green 1969 Pontiac Custom S, with my first girlfriend in the passenger seat. We have been steaming up the car windows and then talking for a while.

My girlfriend starts telling me about the problems of her best friend, a guy who seems to me to have no problems: he's got a trust fund, incredible good looks, a large supportive family, and a very sweet girlfriend of his own.

Then my girlfriend says, "You know, Mike says you talk like Truman Capote."

That isn't the first time I've heard that. But somehow it seems to hurt more this time. I don't say

anything, but just by doing that, my girlfriend can tell that her best friend's comment has bothered me.

A few days later, I will say something nasty about her best friend, and then, after we have a fight, I will tell her about his remark about my talking like Capote and saying I guess I was wrong when I thought her friend liked me.

Next Friday evening we will double-date with her best friend and his girlfriend, and while we are waiting for the girls to come out of the ladies' room – which always takes longer than us guys in the men's room – Mike will say, "You know, I didn't mean anything when I said you talked like Truman Capote," and I will become so embarrassed that I will wave my hands and say, "Oh God, I wish she hadn't told you, I was just being stupid."

And a few years later I will smile when people tell me I talk like a famous author.

*870 United Nations Plaza,  
Thursday, February 22, 1979*

I am standing in the lobby of this incredibly fancy building waiting for the elevator with Wesley Strick, the 25-year-old editor of my forthcoming book of short stories for the publishing company his father owns; Wes's old friend and future brother-in-law Stan Stokowski; and Stan's 11-year-old half brother Anderson Cooper, whom we are taking back to the apartment of his and Stan's mother, Gloria Vanderbilt.

Stan's father was the conductor Leopold Stokowski. Anderson's father, who recently died, was the writer and actor Wyatt Cooper.

I am 27 and still live with my parents at our house in Brooklyn.



Suddenly up walks Truman Capote, wearing a fur coat over blue linen pants that seem too light for this weather. I've read that he has been off drugs and booze for a year now, has taken to swimming a mile every day at the gym, to dieting.

In the lobby of my grandparents' apartment house in Rockaway there's a photo of him in a warm-up suit tacked to a bulletin board, with the caption: "Look who might join us for our daily jogs on the boardwalk! Meet in lobby every morning at 8:00 a.m. for some good exercise!"

I decide not to tell Capote about this. He seems quite mellow and smiles at all of us.

Wes says, "Barbara Walters asked you such stupid questions last night."

Last night Walters was filling in for Johnny Carson, and Capote was her first guest.

"That woman is incapable of asking any other kind of question," Capote tells us as we shuffle into the elevator. It's always been a shock for me to meet famous people, to find that they look and sound just like they do on television.

Then he proceeds to imitate Barbara Walters: "*Truman! Sit right down and insult a few people.*" That was how she greeted him when he came out on *The Tonight Show* set.

Capote goes on and on, mimicking Walters perfectly, getting down her lisp and cadences better than Gilda Radner's "Baba Wawa." He puts a twist on each of her questions and comments that make her sound so silly that we all can't help giggling. The more we laugh, the funnier his performance gets, and that makes us laugh more.

Then his floor comes up. Exiting with a serene smile, Capote says, "You boys have a good evening."

“He’s such a weirdo,” Anderson says after the elevator door closes behind Capote.

Then he looks directly at me, whom he’s never seen before a few hours ago.

“I like weirdoes,” the boy reassures me.

BOTTOM, NEW YORK TIMES,  
FRONT PAGE, TINY PRINT

May 30

MARK: I'M CONCERNED. I'D LIKE TO BE HELPFUL. Join me and my summer chamber group. Call 212-427-3302. Ethel J. – Advt.

June 1

MARK: I'M CONCERNED. I'D LIKE TO BE HELPFUL. Join me and my summer chamber group. Call 212-427-3302. Ethel J. – Advt.

June 6

MARK: Our messages from now will appear here on Sundays, instead of on the front page. We love you and want to help. Please call again so we know we're in touch. How about coming up to the Lake now. Mom, Dad, Noodle.

June 13

MARK: It was reassuring to hear your voice. I know it may be difficult for you to talk. There are things I didn't have time to say. I hope you come to the summer chamber session in the country. It's planned as an easy going vacation. But in any event call again as the phone number you have is a temporary one and will soon be disconnected. I want to give you my permanent number and address so you can contact me whenever you wish. Or if you prefer write me c/o Z4745 Times. E.J.

June 20

MARK: It's been 2 months now. We think it's been hard on you; it's been hard on us. Aren't there ways we could

help you work things out to your liking? We will do whatever will be helpful with no strings attached. Enjoy our new camp together – sailing, hiking, fishing – as something to look forward to. We love you. Mom, Dad, Noodle.

June 27

MARK: The summer job we'd found for you just before you left is still available. It's at an upstate resort run by our friend Seymour. Taking the job does not commit you to seeing us or to returning home or to school in the fall. To contact Seymour call us – we'd love to hear from you – or Bob and Rochelle in Woodmere or Susan in Lynn, Mass. Mom, Dad, Noodle.

July 4

MARK: Judge Brown puzzled by unresolved case of Missing Student. Any clues welcome. He has asked me to serve as his eyes, ears, and heart. Call Chairman Ed, Darien, Conn.

July 11

MARK: We'd like to hear news of you periodically so we're sure you're OK. An organization, "Peace of Mind", Dallas, Texas, toll-free call 800-338-1577 relays messages between kids who've split and parents without revealing the kid's location. If you need money or other aid, we want to help. Love, Mom, Dad, Noodle.

July 18

MARK: Once in a while a sister is good for something even if it's just for a place to crash. If you're on the road and tired of it or short of money but don't want to go home, give me a ring. You can phone me for the summer through Information, Lynn, Mass. I'd love to hear from you. Susan.

July 25

MARK: Was the silent phone call on Monday from you? Doubt leaves us still very upset. We need to know definitely that you're OK for our worries to be eased. Love, Mom, Dad, Noodle.

August 1

MARK: I'd like to hear from you. Write or call me evenings or weekends. Uncle Jake.

August 8

MARK: We're off to camp the 10th. Wish you would join us. Call us at Avery's or call Susan who is home while we're away. Love, Mom, Dad, Noodle.

August 15

MARK: We're thinking of you as your birthday approaches, and feel your absence especially this week. Returning home the 31st. Love, Mom, Dad, Noodle.

August 22

MARK: Being a roommate means never having to say you're sorry. But I would like to hear from you; please call or write. Richie F.

August 29

MARK: If that was you who phoned, let's try it again with more polyphony this time. Uncle Jake.

September 5

MARK: Summer is over, come on home. We miss you. Whatever you do in the fall will be OK with us. Love, Mom, Dad, Noodle.

September 12

MARK: Grandma is terribly upset now that she knows. Her best 83rd birthday present would be to see or hear from you. Mom, Dad, Noodle.

September 19

MARK: Free call 800-338-1577 relays messages from kids who've split without revealing their location. We're worried, please call. Love, Mom, Dad, Noodle.

October 3

MARK: If you choose not to return home now, we'll respect your wish. Will send winter clothes any way you direct, no strings attached. Mom, Dad, Noodle.

October 31

MARK: Need a place to crash or anything? I really want to talk. Sorry about phone mixup in earlier ad. Call thru student info., Cornell, Ithaca, N.Y. Love, Susan.

November 7

MARK: From now on ads will appear every other Sunday. No ad next week. See Times article Oct. 24, p. 31. Love, Mom, Dad, Noodle.

November 21

MARK: Family Thanksgiving at Grandpa Sharr's, Sat., Nov. 27. We'd all love to see you. Mom, Dad, Noodle.

December 5

MARK: Leaving soon to visit Wendy in Uganda and then tour Africa. Love to have you along. Bob and Rochelle.

December 19

MARK: Happiness is seeing or hearing from you this

holiday season. It's been a long time. Love, Mom, Dad, Noodle.

January 2

MARK: New Year is a fine time to start afresh. Whatever your plans, we hope contacting us is included. Love, Mom, Dad, Noodle.

January 16

MARK: Recently Ethel and Ed called asking about you. What we all desire is word that you're OK. Love, Mom, Dad, Noodle.

January 30

MARK: I'm back home. I've finished school. I'd like to talk. Maybe you couldn't reach me before but now you can. Love, Susan.

February 13

MARK: It dawned on us that maybe the silent caller Xmas eve was you. Word from you would be a great relief. Stan and Vicky.

February 27

MARK: Lack of word causes great anguish. Why can't you ease our fears by calling 800-338-1577 if you don't want you're location revealed. Love, Mom, Dad, Susan.

March 13

MARK: Was the silent caller Mar. 2 you? Doubt and anxiety grow daily. Can't you say something, like Grandma's name, so we're sure it's you. Love, Mom, Dad, Susan.

March 27

MARK: We ask again that you call and say Grandma's

name to ease our fears and show us you see these ads.  
Love, Mom, Dad, Susan.

April 10

MARK: Soon you'll have been gone a year. The long separation has been hard on us. We wonder how you've fared. We're worried. We love you. Hearing from you would mean so much to us. Mom, Dad, Susan.

April 24

MARK: A year without word is a long time. We hope you've been well and will feel ready to contact us. Love, Mom, Dad, Susan.

May 8

MARK: Grandma is seriously ill. She asks for you. Seeing or hearing from you means a lot to her now. On leaving the hospital she'll live with us. Love, Mom, Dad, Noodle.

May 22

MARK: Grandma is very weak and may not have much time left. She'd be far less troubled if she knew for sure you were alright. Please come see her or call. Love, Mom, Dad, Susan.

June 5

MARK: We thought you'd want to know. Grandma died last week without suffering much pain. At this time of sorrow, we miss you especially. Love, Mom, Dad, Susan.

June 19

MARK: Susan's off to Europe with Estelle. We and Noodle would love to see you at the lake in Aug. Boone's Harbor phone. Mom, Dad.



July 3

MARK: Why not visit the Lake July/Aug. to swim and sail. You're free to come and go as you wish. Boone's Harbor phone. Love, Mom, Dad.

July 17

MARK: We're off to Lake July 24. Come visit. We'd love celebrating your birthday with you. Boone's Harbor phone. Love, Mom, Dad.

July 31

MARK: No ads in Aug. except on Sat. the 21st. Ads resume Sun., Sept. 11. Then every other week as usual. Love, Mom, Dad.

August 21

MARK: Happy birthday with all our love. We hope to hear from you soon. A warm, loving welcome awaits you. Love, Mom, Dad.

## LAND OF GOLDEN GIANTS

*Corner of Church Avenue and East 43<sup>rd</sup> Street, Brooklyn,  
Friday, March 10, 1961, 3:45 p.m.*

My six-year-old brother Marc wants to stay in Grandma Ethel's apartment with his Dennis the Menace coloring book and crayons. I want him to walk down to the candy store with me, but Marc says Soupy Sales is coming on TV and he doesn't like to miss a show. I like Soupy Sales too, but the candy store is beckoning.

School is over for the week, and our parents have dropped us off with Grandma Ethel while they take Jonathan, who was born a month ago, to the pediatrician. I like Dr. Stein, but I associate the alcohol smell of his offices in Turner Towers with getting shots, and even though Dad said he would take me and Marc across the street to the Brooklyn Museum while the baby was seeing the doctor, we preferred to be with our grandmother.

Grandma Ethel makes sure I button up and tells me to look very carefully before crossing the street. East 43<sup>rd</sup> Street between Church Avenue, a shopping street, and Linden Boulevard, a big four-lane thoroughfare that goes all the way to the end of Queens, is a narrow street where the sky is blocked half the year by a canopy of thick leaves.

It's almost warm today, maybe fifty degrees, and there's nothing left of the snowiest winter I can ever remember. There were three big blizzards: one that started while I was in Hebrew school on Pearl Harbor Day in early December; one that blanketed the whole East Coast on the day of President Kennedy's inauguration on January 20; and the one that struck just a few days before Jonathan was born four weeks ago.

I don't have to look both ways at the corner of Church because Mr. Rubin, the druggist, is sweeping in front of his pharmacy on the west side of the street and offers to cross me. I'm nine, I can cross myself, at least on little streets, but I let him feel good about himself by taking me across and depositing me in front of the candy store.

A bell rings as I open the door. The sign on top of the store with a Coke logo says "Luncheonette," but we always called these places – there was one every three or four blocks on shopping avenues – candy stores. Mrs. Mogg is alone in the store, behind the counter.

"Hi, Mrs. Mogg," I say.

"Hi, Richard," she says. "How's your baby brother?" Mrs. Mogg is a friend of Grandma Ethel's, and also her brother is married to Grandpa Herb's aunt, Tante Lebester. I've never met my great-great-aunt and -uncle but have been told they run their own candy store in Meadville, Pennsylvania.

Grandpa Herb has told me that Tante Lebester was one of the four beautiful Katzman sisters from Russia. The only one I knew was Bubbe Ita, Grandpa Herb's mother, who died a few years ago from cancer. She was my favorite person; I still have the Mickey Mouse cardigan she gave me although it stopped fitting years ago.

My great-grandfather Isidore was a soldier in the Russian army when he saw Bubbe Ita as a girl of fifteen, swinging on a gate one afternoon. He sent his married sister to talk to her father, and a marriage was arranged. My great-grandmother always had skin almost without wrinkles, even though she was really old – seventy-three – when she died.

The other beautiful Katzman sisters were Rose, who married the notorious Depression-era bootlegger Ben Benny in Canada, and Rhoda, the only one who stayed

behind in Russia. Rhoda became a chemist in the Soviet Union until somehow she died young in the mid-1940s. In that strange Jewish custom where people are named for dead relatives of either sex, so long as the first initial is the same, I am named Richard after her.

I stand before the wire racks of comic books, which are really what I came in for. I buy only Superman DC National comics, not the stupid ones with the talking animals or the slightly dumb Archie comics, which I sometimes read from my neighbor Fran Bergman's collection. There's a new *Lois Lane*, but it's another imaginary story where she's married to Superman and on the cover she's driving this dopey little bubblemobile on the street, so that one can wait.

The DC comics have lately started saying "Still 10¢" and my Uncle Matty says that means the price will go up soon. I spot the May issue of *The Flash*, which is what I'm going to spend one of my dimes on. The cover shows this orange-skinned giant, bald and naked except for a green loincloth, being tied up by Flash and Kid Flash with a cable they are unraveling. In the background are snow-capped mountains.

The legend at the bottom of the cover says:  
**"DOUBLE THE THRILLS – DOUBLE THE ACTION  
 – DOUBLE THE SPEED – WHEN FLASH AND KID  
 FLASH TEAM UP IN THE DOUBLE-LENGTH  
 ADVENTURE... 'LAND OF GOLDEN GIANTS!'"**

I hand Mrs. Mogg a dime for the comic. She has only one arm, her left, with the unnecessary right sleeve of her wool sweater lying flat with the wrist end tucked into her pocket. Grandma Ethel says Mrs. Mogg was born that way and so she never really minded. To me, it looked like Mrs. Mogg could do everything with her one arm. Like make me a malted, which is what I ask her to do now as I hop up to sit at one of the round revolving seats at the soda fountain.

“Chocolate?” she asks, as if she has to.

“Yes, please. And a pretzel.” The pretzels are long salty sticks. I like to dunk them in the malted and then eat them although my friend Eugene says it’s gross. Eugene’s grandfather has one arm too, although he had his amputated because there was something wrong with it. Eugene’s grandfather can even drive a car with one arm.

I lay the comic down on the table and divide my attention between the story and watching Mrs. Mogg go about making a malted. Eugene told me this joke about a genie who gives everyone a free wish. He goes to an old man who runs a candy store and the man wishes that he could go on his first vacation and the genie would run the candy store in his place. So the genie whooshes the man down to the beach in Puerto Rico and whooshes back to Brooklyn to take over the candy store in his absence. The first person who walks in the door sits down and asks the genie to make him a malted. “Okay, you’re a malted!” the genie says, and the man is transformed into the drink. It’s kind of dumb but kind of funny, I guess.

Using one arm, Mrs. Mogg fills up the big silver container with vanilla ice cream scooped from the freezer, chocolate syrup (some restaurant kind, not Hershey’s or Bosco), milk, and two spoonfuls of malt powder, which gives the drink that nutty, on-the-edge-of-sour taste I like. The malted mixer whirrs like crazy, and a really pleasant smell, sort of like ozone after a thunderstorm, reaches my nostrils.

“Land of the Golden Giants” is really good. Barry Allen and his girlfriend Iris West take Wally, her teenaged nephew, on a scientific expedition led by a geologist who has this theory that the earth’s continents all used to be one big super-continent and have drifted apart. That’s why, the scientist says, not only does West Africa look like it would fit just above Brazil if Africa

and South America were shoved back together, but also the same kind of animals and fossils appear in both places.

I think this idea is something my teacher, Mrs. Radiloff, would say sounds a little crazy, but it sort of makes sense to me. I am so engrossed in the story that I almost forget to say “Thank you” when Mrs. Mogg pours the first part of the malted from the big silver container into my tall round glass and hands me my pretzel.

They’re in British Guiana now, the ship having landed there, and Wally is getting friendly with the scientist’s teenage daughter Gail, but soon – when they’re in the Highlands – Barry and Wally have to get into their Scarlet Speedster Flash and Kid Flash costumes and whiz around because there are golden giants to be battled. The comic book people really shouldn’t have made Flash and Kid Flash have the same costume, because the only way you can tell them apart is that Kid Flash is shorter and thinner and his muscles aren’t as big.

I always wonder how Iris, who’s an intelligent newspaper reporter, not a goofball like Lois Lane, cannot tell that not only is her boyfriend the fastest man on earth but her nephew is the fastest kid on earth. Iris wears these great clothes and seems sophisticated. Her best friend is this man who is a famous fashion designer. Eugene says the fashion designer is obviously “that way” but the man is friends with Barry/The Flash too and sometimes helps him solve cases.

I prefer The Flash to Superman for a lot of reasons. One of them is that unlike Lois Lane, who only loves Superman and can’t see what a great guy Clark Kent is, Iris West truly loves her nebbishy but smart boyfriend Barry Allen and while she likes The Flash, she’s just friends with him and is not seduced by his being a superhero.

Back in my own neighborhood, when I ride my bike really fast, sometimes I pretend I am The Flash, racing to catch a kid falling from a height or to stop a robbery. I'm riding so fast that you can see the blurry lines of me behind me, just like you can see the blur of his mostly-red (a little yellow, like his boots and the lightning bolt around his waist) costume behind The Flash when he runs.

I don't want to run this afternoon. I want to slowly drink my malted through the straw. It's very thick and chocolate-y and malt-y. Grandpa Herb says the malt in the malted is from barley, like in the mushroom-and-barley soup Grandma Ethel sometimes makes. The salty crunchy bites of my pretzel stick go great with the sweet, almost sour taste of the malted, but I'm down to the last bite and the end of the refill glass (from what was left of the malted in the container) is making a slurpy-gone sound in my straw.

Eventually, after I finish the book-length story in the comic book, I put down the coins for the malted. The story was really good even though there was no costumed super-villain this issue. The Flash has the best super-villains: The Mirror Master, Captain Boomerang, The Trickster, Gorilla Grodd, Captain Cold. Maybe next issue. Changes of pace are good. Sometimes you want a malted, sometimes an egg cream, sometimes a lime rickey.

Part of me wishes that "Land of Golden Giants" wouldn't have ended, that I wouldn't have finished my malted and my pretzel, that I could sit at Mrs. Mogg's soda fountain forever.

"Say hello to your grandmother," says Mrs. Mogg. There are other people in the candy store now: kids buying Lik-M-Aid or spaldeens, men getting one of the afternoon newspapers, a lady drinking a Bromo-Seltzer to settle her stomach.

“I will,” I say as I leave the store and hear the bell that rings every time the door is opened whether you are going in or going out.

*York Avenue and East 68<sup>th</sup> Street, Manhattan,  
Wednesday, August 20, 1980, 11:00 a.m.*

I am at my grandfather's bedside at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center. The nurse comes in and says that my grandfather should be released by noon, but there are some things that they have to take care of first. It's nothing serious, just bureaucratic nonsense probably.

A few days before, when the doctor gave us the diagnosis of lung cancer – the spot had showed up on chest x-rays at the Board of Health in Rockaway, near the co-op apartment where my grandparents have been living for a dozen a years – Grandpa Herb told everyone that he did not want surgery, that he just wanted to go home.

When they tried to put him in the CT scan, he shook so much that they couldn't continue. A few years ago, when we were at a garden party at Uncle Matty's house on Long Island, Grandpa Herb and I were sitting on lawn chairs at a table near the bar when all of a sudden he turned to me and said, “You know, I just can't stop thinking about D-E-A-T-H.”

Not knowing what to say, I nodded and shrugged.

He's not all that old: he'll be just seventy-seven in December. But as the doctor said after laying out all the facts, “Well, you're old enough to know what you're doing. We'll do what we can to make you comfortable.” The doctor was young – maybe younger than I am – but he treated my grandfather with respect.

I live thirteen blocks from my grandparents' co-op in a studio apartment right on the Rockaway boardwalk by



the beach. I pay \$240 a month rent, but have had serious financial problems. In January, a cold turned into labyrinthitis and I was so dizzy for months that it was hard to teach my adjunct courses in composition and remedial writing. I ended up with only three courses at three different colleges, and there has been no work since May.

I qualified for food stamps and have borrowed money from my grandfather and from generous friends like Eugene and his boyfriend. I will pay them back in the fall, when I'm scheduled to teach seven adjunct courses at four colleges.

Grandpa Herb is ready to get dressed. He may be right about not wanting surgery. They say that when they open you up, they expose the tumor to the air and it just grows. I don't know anything about medicine, though, or science, and that could be just an old wives' tale.

I'm going to drive him back to Rockaway today, back home to die – thought it will be slow, because the tumor is pretty small right now. Maybe he'll continue to feel okay for months or even years.

I'll have to remember to change my car's radio station from WQXR because listening to classical music makes Grandpa Herb nervous. I'll put on WEVD, a station old Jewish people like. Grandpa Herb once told me the call letters stand for Eugene V. Debs, the socialist for whom he cast his first vote for President.

"Well, I'll go visit my friend for a while," I tell my grandfather.

"Just get back here by twelve," he says. "I don't want to stay here any longer than I have to."

I get up from my chair, and on my way out, I nod to my grandfather's roommate, the cartoonist Edward Sorel, who is looking over what seem to be galleys with his wife and collaborator Nancy, a writer. They nod back and smile.

Grandpa Herb has told Ed Sorel that I'd had a book of short stories published last year, that I got some nice reviews, but that I can't seem to make a dime as a writer.

"You never make money from books," Ed Sorel told my grandfather. Grandpa Herb wasn't familiar with Ed's work but he understood he was kind of famous so I could tell he respected Ed's opinion.

The temperature is in the nineties already. Crossing first East 68<sup>th</sup> and then York, I look forward to being back in the air conditioning of another hospital. Sloan-Kettering is always chilly.

After getting my visitor's pass, I take the elevator up to where Janice's room is. Unlike my grandfather and Ed Sorel, she is alone.

My friend Linda, whom I've known since second grade at P.S. 203, introduced me to Janice a few years ago. One night Linda took me to Janice's house in Canarsie, near the terminus of the LL train off Rockaway Parkway, to play Scrabble and smoke pot and drink wine with Janice and her friend Dolores.

They were about ten years older than Linda and I, but I liked them both immediately. Dolores was earthy and warm and worked at a health food store in Soho. Janice worked as a graphic artist, but she also made her own art and was involved in starting a cooperative among visual artists in Brooklyn. They rented a storefront downtown, near Fulton Street, and used it as a gallery to display their work. But it was hard to get people to come from Manhattan to see it, as nobody believed that real artists would live in Brooklyn.

Janice was tall and rangy. She had a Halloween party one year and dressed as Fritzi Ritz, the aunt in the Nancy comic strip; I thought the part seemed like a natural for her. The first night I met her, I asked her what she thought of conceptual art.

"I can't conceive of such a thing," she said.

Janice was a widow, probably the only person I know who had lost a spouse except maybe for some girls from the neighborhood who married guys who were killed in Vietnam. Her husband died of some degenerative disease. She didn't talk about it, but I once looked through her family albums. He'd been a handsome, robust Polish guy, a boxer, and you could see him fading away, picture by picture, month by month, until the photos were just Janice and her daughter Ingrid alone or with other relatives.

Janice didn't talk about her husband much. Once, when telling a nurse that she had a daughter named Ingrid, she said, "My husband worshipped Ingrid Bergman."

They won't let me in Janice's room right away because the doctors or nurses are doing something. I wait in the corridor and nearby is an old woman lying on a gurney, her skin a shade of green I have never seen before on a human being. It wasn't like the "You look green" when people are seasick or about to vomit. It was actual *green* green, like the skin of J'onn J'onzz, the Manhunter from Mars.

How were such things possible?

Janice got the breast cancer diagnosis just a week after I met her. So she's been sick throughout the few years of our friendship, and I've visited her in other hospitals, like Brookdale close to home back in Brooklyn.

Brookdale, at the intersection of Linden Boulevard and Rockaway Parkway, was where Janice had her mastectomy. It was also the hospital where my brothers and I were born, back when it was Beth El Hospital. Grandpa Herb has told me that poor Jewish women like his mother, Bubbe Ita, would put nickels in a charity box every week in the 1920s to raise money to build the hospital for the community.

When she first told me she was going into Sloan-Kettering, Janice always referred to it as "Sloan Catering." She called this stretch of York Avenue, with all its hospitals, "Bedpan Alley." Now Janice is far too sick to pun. When I finally get to see her, I am grateful she recognizes me. The last time I was there, the nurse had told me that she doesn't have much time left.

The last time we went anywhere together, I drove her to the Foundation Library to do some research for some artists' grants she was trying to get for the cooperative. But she got very tired very quickly, and we couldn't go to an exhibit at Asia House next door as we'd planned. I had to put her seat back so she could lie down on the drive back to Brooklyn.

Now Janice needs an oxygen mask a lot of the time. The cancer has ravaged not only her body but also her face. Her eyes look so old and tired.

"Richie," she asks, "do you have any paper?"

"Yes," I say. "I can get it. What do you want me to write?"

The TV is on, it's channel 13, they are showing some documentary featuring an ancient Winifred Wagner, daughter-in-law of the composer. Janice's attention is momentarily fixed on the TV set, and she says, "That woman loved Hitler so."

"Yeah," I say.

And then Janice returns to what she wanted the paper for. "You need to make a Percocet chart," she tells me.

"Uh-huh," I say, getting out a pen and taking out the receipt from the New York Hospital parking lot to write on.

"Make a list of all the times and the times I can have another Percocet."

"Okay," I say, "I'm doing that right now."

"Good," Janice says, and she watches Winifred Wagner for a while, occasionally glancing over to see

what progress I'm making with the Percocet chart. Mostly I'm writing down numerals at random.

"Richie," Janice says, all out of breath. "Want to put makeup on?"

"I don't wear makeup, Janice."

"No. On *me*."

"I think girls look prettier without makeup on," I say. "The natural look."

She smiles benignly, closes her eyes, and I feel that I have said something good. When her eyes are closed for a while, I see that she is sleeping, not dead, and I sit there for about ten minutes watching her and looking at the Winifred Wagner interview on TV. Finally, I get up and leave quietly.

As I go downstairs and again walk in the Manhattan heat across York Avenue to fetch my grandfather and take him home to Rockaway – where at least it will be ten degrees cooler – I think about my last lunch with Dolores and how upset she was, falling apart even, about Janice's impending death. I'd always thought Dolores was so strong, like an earth mother, and in that Soho macrobiotic restaurant I found myself comforting her. It was a reversal I didn't like.

Dolores said that Janice's sister and brother-in-law would take over everything. "They're so Italian," Dolores said, although she was Italian herself. "So truly Canarsie."

Mostly she was worried about Ingrid, who was now fifteen. Janice wanted her to live with her cousin, another artist in the downtown Brooklyn cooperative, who wouldn't fill Ingrid's head with all that Catholic stuff and conservative ideas that Janice's brother-in-law and sister would shove down the girl's throat.

But Janice hadn't made any provisions for guardianship, and Janice's mother was too old to take Ingrid, so the girl will end up with the Di Falcos.

“She’ll be okay,” I told Dolores. “All Janice’s friends will look out for her.”

My grandfather’s all dressed and packed and looking like a hospital visitor, no longer a patient, in the chair beside the bed. “What’s been keeping you?” he asked. “I’ve been ready for quite a while.”

I pick up his valise, we say goodbye to the Sorels, and Ed wishes me good luck with my writing. In the elevator, Grandpa Herb asks, “How’s your friend?”

“*Nicht gut*,” I say, wondering why I am speaking German.

*Pompano Beach Civic Center,  
1801 NE 6<sup>th</sup> Street, Pompano Beach, Florida  
Saturday, September 21, 2002, 1:30 p.m.*

I’ve been in Fort Lauderdale for nine months now, having moved here to take a position as director of the academic resource program at Nova Southeastern University Law School. I haven’t really read comic books in years. But seeing an article in *The South Florida Sun-Sentinel* and feeling lonely and at loose ends on weekends – I don’t have any family or close friends living here anymore – I’ve come to the Weekend Fall/Con, a comic book convention.

I’m sitting in a small auditorium among a crowd of mostly males, nearly all younger than I am, a few dressed up in silly costumes like from the *Star Wars* movies or other characters I don’t recognize. There are a few older guys, and I try not to think of the fat, pathetic Comic Book Guy on *The Simpsons*. I deliberately sit next to a man around my age – okay, maybe a decade younger, he looks about forty – who’s with twin boys in their early teens. The father is casually dressed but he’s got style: you can see he’s got money and not showy money, either.

This guy is more out of place in this crowd than schlumpy me, but of course he's got the excuse of having two young comic-book-loving sons.

We're listening to 86-year-old Martin Nodell, who lives in the area. He created the original Golden Age version of Green Lantern in 1940. Mr. Nodell talks about how he got the idea for the power ring and Green Lantern's weakness being wood and about Green Lantern's comic assistant, taxi driver Doiby Dickles and Doiby's cab, which was named Goitrude.

The Green Lantern I knew back in the early 1960s, the one who'd team up now and then with The Flash, was completely different, and the stories had a science fiction bent, with lots of intelligent aliens and adventures on different planets.

That Green Lantern's secret identity was the test pilot Hal Jordan in Coast City. Hal worked for Carol Ferris, the CEO of a defense contracting company, and Hal's best friend and assistant was Thomas Kalaku, an Eskimo married to an Eskimo woman, who had her own career. When I was ten, I might have been able to roughly define the words *feminism* and *diversity*, but I don't think I ever used them.

The Green Lantern of today's graphic novels is a completely different character. I'd read about the latest comic book in *The New York Times*. Seeking justice for the vicious gay-bashing of his teenage assistant, Green Lantern infiltrates the Rikers Island cell of the boy's attacker, levitates him upside down, and uses his power ring to extract the names of the guy's fellow assailants. Then he breaks the violent homophobe's wrist.

The current Green Lantern writer is Judd Winick, who was on MTV's *The Real World: San Francisco* with Pedro Zamora, the late AIDS activist whose surviving partner I heard speak at a symposium in Gainesville sometime in 1996, when the big news was that drugs

called protease inhibitors were coming out, years too late to help Eugene or his boyfriend or all my other friends who died in New York during the 1980s.

Someone asks Mr. Nodell if he could have ever imagined this gay stuff in a Green Lantern comic book.

"What he's doing, Mr. Winick, I have nothing against that," Mr. Nodell says. "Artists exist in a wide-open area where they should think and say what they want to. The more they think in all different areas, the more power to them."

As we file out after the session is over, I say to the well-dressed fortyish man, "He's an impressive old guy."

"Yes, very," the man says.

I tell him I really haven't been into comic books since I was a kid back in Brooklyn. The man tells me he grew up on Long Island but his wife was from Brooklyn. He's younger than I am, so he was a Marvel person, not a DC person, and I tell him I was both, that discovering Spider-Man and Stan Lee's other neurotic, New York-based superheroes was like hearing The Beatles or Dylan or David Bowie for the first time.

His twin boys have run ahead of us, into the room where they're selling vintage comic books – some of the "vintage" ones seem to be from the 1980s and 1990s – and all kinds of superhero and science fiction tchotchkes. The man's cell phone rings, but the reception is bad and I hear him shout, "Ingrid, I'll call you back in ten minutes. I promise we're not staying any longer."

Then he tells me they're just down in Florida for the weekend, to visit his wife's uncle, and she wants him back at the old guy's condo.

"What part of Brooklyn is your wife from?" I ask him.

"Canarsie. We still keep a place in the city but we moved out to the house in Westhampton year-round now."



"Westhampton is beautiful," I say. I was there once, in the summer of 1980, at the beach house of the artist Racelle Strick, whose son was the editor of my first book, and Racelle's husband, the Broadway set designer Peter Larkin. It was only for a day, but it was one of the nicest days in an otherwise horrible summer.

Then I tell the man I'm from around Canarsie too, and say, "Your wife's name is Ingrid?"

"Yeah," he says, suspiciously, as if he's getting the feeling I'm a creep.

"Her maiden name wasn't Bandyk, was it?" I ask.

"Wow, yeah," he says. "You know Ingrid?"

"When she was a kid, slightly. I was friends with her mother."

"Her father too?"

"No," I say, "he died years before I knew Janice."

"Hm," he says. "How weird." He tells me how he met Ingrid and how they have a daughter named Janis in addition to the twin boys and how Ingrid volunteered at Ground Zero and how they got involved with September Space, a community center on Eighth Avenue which helps people cope with the aftermath of the attacks.

He remembers that we haven't exchanged names, so he says he's Philip Castiglia and asks my name. I tell him, but I doubt that Ingrid would remember me. Then I ask Philip what he does, and he waves his hand and says, almost apologetically, "Oh, I'm a director of a hedge fund." I nod my head.

"Your mother-in-law was a nice woman," I tell him. "A good artist, too."

"Ingrid's uncle says she was quite 'avant-garde.'"

I smile. There's an entry for me in the reference book *Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes*. The little article, originally published in the early 1990s, says that I was once one of the most prolific young fiction writers of the 1970s and early 1980s. The author of the entry, Richard

Kostelanetz, concludes, "I speak of him in the past tense not because he has passed away, but at last report he has stopped writing and has entered law school."

I started writing again, even while I was still in law school, but my stories are no longer so innovative or so interesting.

Philip and I shake hands, say it's been nice to meet each other, and then he goes off to find his sons and leave the comic book convention.

Alone, I stroll the aisles, looking at the rows of comic books. It is amazing how many of them I can recall owning. That issue of *Metal Men* in which Tin got melted down. That one of *Adventure Comics*, featuring the Legion of Super-Heroes from the 30<sup>th</sup> century. (Cosmic Boy must have been the only male superhero with a pink costume.) And I can remember exactly which of the five candy stores on Avenue N between Utica and Ralph Avenues where I bought that issue of *Fantastic Four* with the origin of Dr. Doom.

The only Brooklyn candy store I've been to in years is Pete's Candy Store, a Williamsburg bar for cool twenty-somethings where a young local artist friend took me two months ago.

And then I see it, in the middle of rows of old comics covered in plastic: The Flash and Kid Flash tying up that golden giant. The woman who sells it to me for fifty dollars says it's in "very fine" condition.

I tell her I wish I could say the same thing about myself, but I'm ten years older than the comic book. She laughs. It's an old guy's joke, but I'm an old guy now.

## G-D IS MY FUCKBUDDY

Significant others come and go but fuckbuddies can be forever.

At least that's how it's been in this man's version of life. G-d has blessed me with the hottest buddies of anyone I know. And Avi was the best of the best.

After seven years of his coming over every couple of weeks, I probably knew his body better than his boyfriend did. They had been together only two years, after all.

What I didn't know was his mind. Not that I cared about that much – probably not any more than he cared about mine.

The Talmud says that G-d created two kinds of fuckbuddies: friends with benefits and sex mates.

FWBs had sex together for the physical gratification, but they weren't friends because of the sex. The sex was just one of the perks of an already-existing friendship.

Sex mates got together only for the sex and otherwise had no social interactions at all.

Avi fell into the latter category. Once we started fooling around, we rarely even sat together in the synagogue where we had met. We had different friends we preferred to hang out with. Not to sound holier-than-thou, but I think I take prayer more seriously than Avi does.

So for the first several years of our fuckbuddyship, one particular quirk of Avi's during sex puzzled me. I think he probably wouldn't have been offended if I'd asked him about it right off – he seems like a pretty open guy, not that I know him all that well – but it kept me amused to wonder about it. It was the socks thing. I liked to imagine his reasons.

Was it because he was lazy? (“David, the last thing I’m thinking about when about to fuck you is bothering to take my socks off.”)

Was it intense, zen-like concentration on the job at hand? (“David, when I’m in the middle of fucking your brains out, all my efforts are concentrated on you.”)

Given Avi’s looks, was it an inferiority complex based on his unattractiveness? (“I only take off what I need to, David, and I have particularly ugly feet.”)

I told my first ex-boyfriend about this, and he suggested that maybe Avi had particularly sharp toenails and did not want to scratch me.

Another of my fuckbuddies, a highly intelligent drag queen, said Avi probably preferred “not to feel completely naked – some men are like that.”

When drunk one Purim night, I even asked Rabbi Kleinbaum her opinion, and her first thought was odor: “Foot perspiration is a big problem for a lot of people, and perhaps Avi does not want to upset the mood.”

This went on for years. I never said anything to Avi about it. Then, for some reason, one Shabbat I found myself sitting next to him as a guest rabbi talked about that week’s Torah reading:

“How often it is that spiritual awakening comes even to a person who is not on a high enough level of awareness to be purified and to ascend higher?” the rabbi asked. “Instead, in the middle of the journey, his lower instincts overcome him, paralyze him, render him unable to move on.”

Avi shifted his weight in the next seat. I’m really aware of his body, if not of any other part of him.

“Then,” said the rabbi, “there are the pious and the righteous ones who, as we read in Isaiah 40:4, set their hearts on, ‘making the rugged level, and the crooked places like a plane.’ They clear away every obstacle from the way of the Ruler who ascends to the mountain of

Adonai. They do not remain frozen in the middle of the journey.”

I glanced at Avi. Although it was his body I was intimate with, even I could tell his mind was wandering as the rabbi went on:

“This is the difference between Terach and Abraham. For while there was awakened in Terach the clear vision to set out for the Land of Canaan, he changed his mind in the middle of the journey. As it is written, ‘But when they came to Haran, halfway between Ur and Canaan, they settled there.’”

Avi coughed and our eyes met. He smiled and I smiled back. We were supposed to see each other the following night.

The rabbi shot a look at us – we weren’t being disruptive, so I don’t know what *that* was for – and went on:

“But Abraham, our forefather, was not content to rest. He did not get cold feet in the middle of the journey...”

Avi leaned over and whispered in my ear: “Unlike *me*...but of course you know that.”

I don’t remember the rest of what the rabbi said about the week’s parsha. All I could think of was that I’d solved a longtime mystery and that Avi would no longer be as interesting to me.

Fortunately, the sex was as good as ever.

## FORGOTTEN MOVIE SCREENS OF BROWARD COUNTY

### *University Cinema 4*

This four-screen theater, in a small strip shopping center at the corner of Pines Boulevard and University Drive, was where Mom and Dad took us to see *Kramer vs. Kramer* one night during Christmas vacation in 1979. Our family had just moved to Broward County the month before.

We drove down University from our townhouse in Davie, passing orange groves and cow pastures. In the dark we couldn't see any cows or the creatures Mom called their mascots, the ducks who would sit on their backs.

Soon after the scene where Dustin Hoffman throws the little boy's French toast into the garbage, Edward got up and went out of the theater. We assumed he was going to the bathroom, but when he didn't come back, we started getting worried.

Finally Dad went out to look for Edward, but he wasn't in the men's room or at the candy counter or in the tacky little lobby. Eventually Dad found Edward watching Steven Spielberg's *1941* on another screen.

Later I'd think that as young as he was, Edward knew that something was up between Mom and Dad. He didn't want to see a movie about divorce. It was easier for him to watch something from the past.

The University Cinema 4 was torn down in 1994 and replaced by a warehouse and storage complex.

*Lakes Mall Cinema*

A year later we all went to see *Coal Miner's Daughter* at this six-screen theater at the Lakes Mall at the corner of U.S. 441 and Oakland Park Boulevard.

Before that we'd had dinner at Pumpernick's in Hallandale and then went to the greyhound track. Rachel thought the way they treated the dogs was cruel, so we left after a few races even though Dad had picked two winners.

Maybe that's why he seemed annoyed as we aimlessly drove up 441, through Hollywood, Plantation and Lauderhill. In the back seat, we all noted that Mom and Dad had spoken to us, but not to each other, all night.

When Edward saw the theater marquee, he nagged so much that Dad made a sudden illegal U-turn and lurched the station wagon into the mall parking lot.

We had to wait almost an hour for the next show. After we got our tickets, Edward and Rachel and I walked around the mall, Rachel holding Edward's hand, till we joined Mom and Dad on line at the theater.

They had been talking about something while we were gone.

Even though none of us were country music fans, we agreed afterwards that *Coal Miner's Daughter* was a great film.

It was the last movie we saw as a family.

The Lakes Mall got decrepit and finally closed, replaced by some low-rent big box stores.

Last year the Magic Johnson Development Company opened one of the Starbucks stores they put in African American neighborhoods across from where the theater was.

Dale and I go there on Sunday mornings to sit on their patio, drink overpriced coffee, and read the *Sun-Sentinel*.

#### *Broward Mall 4*

This four-screen theater, which was 14,000 square feet on 3.6 acres, opened in 1978, the same year as the Broward Mall across the street from it.

It was the movie theater I went to the most. It was where I saw *Pretty in Pink* and *Making Love* and *The Last Emperor*.

Sean and I saw *Victor/Victoria* here at a Saturday matinee on a rainy weekend around the time we were graduating Nova High.

While Julie Andrews was singing a sentimental song, Sean's hand reached for mine. It was the first time I ever held hands with a guy and I felt a little paranoid about someone seeing us, like the black twins from school who worked as ushers there.

But I wasn't paranoid enough to let go. In a couple of months Sean would be heading for Tallahassee and I'd be going to Gainesville.

We made plans to see each other a lot, but once freshman year started somehow we were busy every weekend till November, when I saw him at the Gators/Seminoles game. By then it was too late. Three months after that, Grandpa Dave died and Grandma Sarah came down from New York to stay with Dad at his condo. During spring break, I took Grandma to the Broward Mall 4 to see *The Outsiders*.

Because Grandma had been taking care of Grandpa all those years he'd been sick, she hadn't been to a movie in years. So I guess it was sort of selfish to make



Grandma see something I wanted to see, but she ended up liking *The Outsiders*.

Over cheesecake at Danny's afterwards, she asked me about the young actors in it and if I thought they were handsome.

In 1991, after business at the Broward Mall 4 had been bad for years, new owners came in and turned it into an art movie house. But nine months later, Hurricane Andrew struck; the storm damaged the building. The movie chain that leased the theater decided to close rather than make repairs.

The last film I saw here was *Mississippi Masala*.

A plan for the city of Plantation to buy this property for an art museum fell through, and today it's just another strip shopping center with a parking lot.

### *Art Towne Twin*

This tiny theater, in the back of a little enclosed shopping center on Broward Boulevard at NW 65<sup>th</sup> Avenue, opened in 1984 and closed three years later. It showed foreign films and art films.

At home on vacations from UF and then that year I lived with Dad and basically did nothing, I went here by myself to see *Fred and Ginger*, *Sid and Nancy*, and *My Beautiful Laundrette* (twice).

The same kid who sold you tickets also took the tickets from you, and later he'd be running the little candy counter. I felt so bad for him that I bought their overpriced popcorn and Coke.

I saw *The Official Story* and *Tampopo* here with Edward, who was the youngest person in the audience – not that there ever were that many people.

I think watching so many foreign films is partly what made Edward decide to go to Israel when he got old enough. That and what happened to our family.

Rachel and her boyfriend took me to the Art Towne Twin on my birthday to see *The Dead*.

The little mall burned down in 1996. They said the owners didn't want to put in a sprinkler system because they thought it cost too much.

A giant Publix supermarket stands on this spot today.

### *Inverrary Five*

It seemed as if every time I would go to this Lauderhill theater, I'd meet one of my great-aunts or great-uncles who had condos nearby. On Oakland Park Boulevard in a little strip shopping center, the Inverrary Five drew mostly senior citizens.

Sean and I saw the last movie we ever saw together here, at the end of a day that we'd spent mostly in bed. At *Poltergeist* he grabbed my hand only at the scary parts and he didn't hold on long. Mom's Aunt Rose and Uncle Manny were three rows in front of us.

When the Inverrary Five closed on Christmas Eve in 1993, Rachel said she was surprised it had ever made money because ninety per cent of the theatergoers received senior discounts.

By then all of Mom's aunts and uncles were gone. Grandma Sarah had died the month before in a nursing home.

Sometime in 1995, this theater reopened, and the new owners tried to make a go of it by programming black-oriented films such as *Ride* for the blue-collar African Americans who lived south of the theater and films such as *Odd Couple II* for the surviving seniors who lived to the north.

You could see the staff worked hard, scrambling to clean the theaters as soon as the audience left. Ushers escorted people to their seats with flashlights, a good thing with such an elderly clientele. They charged only five dollars for full-price admission at night.

Rachel and her husband didn't live that far away, but they said they never would consider going to a movie here.

"It's a dinosaur," Rachel said a few weeks before it closed for the last time.

### *Pembroke Pines 8*

I can't remember when this theater opened. It was on Pines Boulevard west of Flamingo Road, long before the Pembroke Lakes mega-mall and various power centers made this the worst intersection for traffic accidents in the state of Florida.

By 1987, I didn't go to many movies with Dad, but just before I moved out of his condo because his girlfriend got on my nerves too much, we went here – him, Mireya, and me – to see *Platoon*.

I was always told that Mom and Dad put me in a stroller when they went on antiwar marches during Vietnam. I think I remember this one rally when I was about eight years old. Edward was the kid in the stroller by then.

Outside the theater after the show, we noticed a group of Vietnam veterans, some of whom I recognized from the army/navy store where I worked. They were huddled together like members of a football team, crying and hugging each other. Dad said they probably all had their post-traumatic stress disorder triggered by the movie.

About five years later, Dale and I saw *Malcolm X* at this theater. I thought he would like it better than he did, but Dale said that growing up in St. Kitts, he paid more attention to music and cricket than to African American history.

*Malcolm X* was too long, Dale said, and anyway, he preferred comedies. To Dale, Spike Lee went downhill after *She's Gotta Have It*, which he found very funny.

The last movie I saw here was *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*. I was very surprised when they closed this theater in September 2000 because it had seemed so new.

### *Coral Springs Mall 4 and Coral Springs Triplex*

When we first moved to Broward, the Coral Springs Mall was the place to go when we used to drive all the way north up University Drive. But by the mid-1980s, it was overshadowed by the larger regional mall at Coral Square.

On our second date, Dale and I saw *Peggy Sue Got Married* at the four-screen theater inside this mall. He told me afterwards he couldn't relate to straight white people's love stories. I told him I didn't think *Peggy Sue Got Married* was a love story, unless a person could be in love with the past.

Eventually moviegoers didn't want to walk past all those depressing empty stores. The Coral Springs Mall 4 seemed tacky and cheap and always playing pictures like *Ernest Goes To Camp* and *Creepshow II*.

In the early 1990s, after her fiancé died, Mom ended up working at one of this mall's few surviving stores, Uptons.

One night when Mom's car had broken down again and I was teaching a night class at FAU, Dale came to pick Mom up when the store closed.

Somehow he and Mom got to talking with Hamid, the guy who owned the theater in the mall. Hamid told them how he fled Iran in 1979 with \$700 in his pocket.

Mom told him that 1979 was the year our family came to Broward County, the same year the Coral Springs Mall was built.

The first theater Hamid bought was the triplex a few miles south on University Drive and Royal Park Boulevard. He thought it would be easy to make money, but four months later a national chain opened the eight-screen theater at the new Coral Square regional mall. Hamid had to turn the triplex into a dollar theater.

Mom worked at Uptons only a year before deciding to move to Ocala. She could sell the townhouse for a lot of money and live in a place where the cost of living was lower.

The Coral Springs Mall closed. The city took over the land, and on the property now are a charter school and a regional Broward County library. Today Hamid's company owns only megaplexes like the Egyptian-themed Paradise 24, at the corner of I-75 and Sheridan Drive in Davie. It averages 100,000 patrons per screen per month and on some weekends is one of the ten busiest cinemas in the country.

At the Paradise 24, Dale and I usually buy our ticket with a credit card from a machine and head for the cappuccino bar before the show starts. The theater has a Dolby surround sound system, oversized stadium seats that rock back and forth, curbside valet parking, and a façade and interior as imposing as the pyramids.

Even though Hamid is now a multi-millionaire, Dale swore he saw him behind the counter frying popcorn shrimp when we took Rachel's twins to the Paradise 24 to see *Shrek 2*.

As for the Coral Springs Triplex, after it closed, nobody leased the space in the little strip shopping center

on Royal Park Boulevard. If you look through the glass doors, you can see lots of dust and faded old movie posters.

Sometimes I go on this web site called Lost Treasures, which celebrates fondly-remembered theaters that are now gone. But they're all old city theaters like the Loew's Paradise of my childhood in the Bronx: a majestic 4,000-seat theater with an Italian Baroque-style facade, Corinthian columns, sweeping staircase, etched-glass lighting fixtures and gilded railings.

Multi-screen suburban shopping-center theaters built in the 1970s and 1980s are not considered Lost Treasures, and I can understand why. They weren't handsome or imposing or well-built or historically significant.

I'm none of those things, either – which is probably why I identify with them.

## 98.6° OF KEVIN BACON

When I lived with my friend Nina on West 85<sup>th</sup> Street in the 1980s, I would constantly encounter celebrities who lived on our block. Whether I encountered Yitzhak Perlman walking his dog, or John Lithgow lugging home groceries, I prided myself in making sure not to gawk. They deserved their privacy, and besides, I felt I was being cool when I passed Mick Jagger and didn't stare.

One morning I was headed toward Broadway when I noticed Kevin Bacon coming toward me, carrying a huge mirror. Lost in thought, I forgot he wasn't someone I really "knew," and I boomed out, "Hey, Kevin, how ya' doin'?"

Not missing a step, he replied, "Good, yourself?"

"Fine," I said, and then I was completely embarrassed about making a fool of myself.

A few weeks later, I saw Kevin, his wife and their kid approaching me as I walked down West End Avenue. Determined not to make the same mistake twice, as they got closer I made sure to look straight ahead and ignore them.

"Hey!" Kevin Bacon called out in my direction. "What's doing?"

"Um...great, great," I stammered as our paths crossed.

Had my previous greeting led him to believe that he knew me from somewhere? Did he now think I was trying to snub him? Was I going to have to say hi to him every time I saw him now? Would he remember that he remembered me, or forget and think that I was some annoying fan?

The next time I saw Kevin Bacon, I crossed the street to avoid him.



## VICTORY BOULEVARD

*The Two Arties*

I'm outside Hale Junior High in my sister's white minivan with the Christian fish symbol on the rear. It's early, but I remember Susan's admonition not to park in The Queen's space.

At a PTA auction, The Queen of the Parking Line paid several thousand dollars to get the prime space for picking up kids. I don't think Susan and Grant bid for that item, though I'm sure they put out some of their money to help the school. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, parents have to do something to supplement the pathetic budget.

I think about calling Jaime. Jaime thinks I'm his boyfriend and he's probably right – more about that later. My nephew and his friends – Artie Chavez and Artie Chang – will be coming out of school soon, and Jaime will just get annoyed if we're interrupted by twelve-year-olds. Like me, Jaime gets annoyed easily.

The boys are all in different classes, so they tend to come out one at a time. I've done this for Susan before, am an old hand at Picking Up the Kids.

Artie Chavez is first. His father takes them all in the morning. Artie's still got the wild hair, thickly gelled and pointing up and around in various directions, that Wyatt abandoned after fifth grade.

"Hey," Artie says and scoots into the right seat all the way in the back.

"Hey," I say, and go back to thinking about Jaime. I need to call him about tonight. Of course *he* could have called me by now.

A few minutes later, Artie Chang appears, gets into the seat next to his namesake. There's no car-pool reciprocity with Artie Chang's parents, but we take him out of courtesy and because his mom has breast cancer.

It's weird how Artie and Artie not only have the same first name, but the same first three letters of their last name. Back in my classes at P.S. 16 in Staten Island I had to be "Richard G." and a kid I didn't like much had to be "Richard P." If the two Arties were in the same class, one would have to be "Artie Chan." and the other would have to be "Artie Chav."

Artie Chang doesn't bother to say "Hey" to me, but that's okay; he's quiet. Something's going on with a pack of chewing gum Artie Chavez has handed him, but it's too subtle for me.

I wonder if my sister would want kids chewing gum in the minivan, contemplate them parking used-up gum somewhere in the vehicle, finally decide not to say anything.

Wyatt shows up. He's usually last, which I suppose could be awkward, but it's not. Wyatt's long blonde hair cascades down both sides of his forehead. The streaks of red he put in weeks ago are fading into a kind of bubblegum pink.

When I was seventeen, I bleached my honey-brown hair blonde. "What possessed you to do that?" Dad asked when he saw me, his usual tolerance momentarily startled. I'm not sure; maybe it was the photo of the surfer boy on the box of Clairol's Summer Blonde. There wasn't much surfing in Staten Island. Now I take Wyatt out to Malibu to use his skimboard.

"Hey," Wyatt says as he gets into his seat just behind mine.

"Hey," I say, and then: "Belted up?" With assurances – and seventh-graders – in place, I head out

toward the next stop, El Camino High. The Queen of the Parking Line is still waiting for her little princess.

"Look at this fake pen I got," my nephew says to his friends in the back. "You can put a cap in it, with gunpowder, and it will make a sound that will really scare somebody. I'll scare Lindsay."

"That thing won't scare anyone," says a skeptical Artie Chavez. "It's so gay – what I bought is better."

"Hey!" I say, looking in the rear view mirror. It's a different "hey" than the last four.

"Sorry, Richie," says Artie Chavez.

"It's okay," I tell him. "Just say *lame* next time instead."

They're good kids. He didn't mean anything. I don't want to embarrass Artie, so I ask him what he bought.

"It's a fake pack of gum, and when you pull out a stick, it hits you in the thumb."

"It's a metal thing," Artie Chang explains.

As I pull up to a side street a couple of blocks from my niece's high school, the boys debate who will go first with the fake pack of gum. They are all a little afraid of getting hurt.

"I'll do it," I say. As if I have something to prove to these children.

Artie Chavez passes it up to Wyatt, who decides to ham it up. Like his uncle at that age, the kid has been bitten by the acting bug and has two plays under his belt already.

"Richie," he says with exaggerated politeness, "would you like a piece of gum?"

Wyatt holds out the pack for me. The Arties are craning their necks to watch.

It's not that I'm a masochist. Okay, a little bit, but this doesn't seem like fun.

Playing my part – the way I always do – I say, “I’d love a piece of gum.” I pull out the fake stick of gum, and then, snap, it’s over. But not before I say “Ow!”

Did I have to say “Ow!”? Maybe not, but it did sting for a second. I don’t remember ever hurting my thumbnail before.

Jaime calls my thumbnails little TV sets because they’re wider than they are long.

“Did it hurt?” Artie Chang asks.

“A little,” I say, and Artie Chang decides he’s brave enough to try it next. I am such a good role model.

“Hey, Lindsay,” Wyatt says as his sister enters the car. “I bought you a really great pen.” Lindsay, fifteen, looks just like my sister did at that age, down to the wire-rimmed glasses and the waves in her long blonde hair and the sprinkling of acne on her forehead.

Lindsay sits in front, next to me. She does not look back. “You don’t really think I’m going to fall for that, do you?” Lindsay says to her brother, shooting me an eyeroll and a smile.

I smile back at her and get ready to pull out.

“Ow!” Artie Chang says from the rear seat.

### *Jaime's Not My Heart's Desire*

I continue subbing for Susan as suburban-mom, dropping Lindsay off at the gym, taking the Arties home, fixing Wyatt a snack and helping him with his math homework – calculating the area of triangles. He’s got to do his homework early, before the Ritalin starts to wear off. After we finish math, I get him to play some horrible first-person-shooter video game with the promise that if he gives me just half an hour, we’ll shoot hoops outside.

I use my time to retreat to the guest house and call Jaime.

Jaime's voice is high and slightly fem, the kind of voice I've always liked in a guy. Jaime's also from New York – a Colombian from Jackson Heights – so he talks English the way it should be spoken, without most R's.

"Wassup?" he says.

"Nothing much," I say back. I'm not that crazy about *wassup*, but Jaime is Jaime, and most of what he says sounds good to my ears. Not that I adore him or anything.

We talk about my coming over. We're supposed to see Bright Eyes at the Henry Fonda Theater, which is okay with me even though I'll probably be the oldest person there. I tell Jaime I'll come by around seven.

Then we wander into yada-yadaland as I lie on my futon, only slightly aware that my hand is on my crotch. I tell Jaime about Artie Chavez's calling Wyatt's joke pen *gay* and he starts talking about Dewayne, his ex-boyfriend in New York who teaches incarcerated high school kids at Rikers Island.

The guys that Dewayne teaches end sentences with the phrase "no homo" after they say something that could be misinterpreted. As in: "Hey, I really like your shoes, no homo." Or, when Dewayne put on the blackboard a quote from Shakespeare about the course of true love: "Man, that nigga knew what he was talking about, no homo."

I'm more bothered by the kids using the N-word than I am *no homo*, which seems like a sign of progress if you don't stop think how depressing it is that straight teenage boys feel that any expression of sensitivity or human feeling is, well, gay. Of course, Dewayne's students are probably going to spend half their adult lives in prison.

Jaime is talking more about Dewayne. He does this because he's waiting for me to say something indicating that I'm jealous. It's never going to happen because I was born without the jealousy gene. Not only is

Dewayne a great guy, I never would have known Jaime without meeting Dewayne first, at a joint reading we did at Midnight Special in Santa Monica sponsored by the small press that published both my book of idiotic stories and Dewayne's first book of poetry, which I admired. So it's not as if I never knew Dewayne existed and that one drunken weekend they drove halfway from Queens to Bennington to get a civil union before Dewayne chickened out.

There's no way I'm going to going to feign jealousy to satisfy Jaime's desperate need for reassurance. As if jealousy would do it.

Part of me wishes Jaime still had something going on with Dewayne because that would take the pressure off. I do know enough not to actively encourage Jaime to see other guys. That would make him go berserk.

I still want to be with Jaime, but just for now. There's the difference in our ages, and I still don't know how long I'll stay in L.A. Jaime's here "for good," whatever that means.

Once Jaime sighs, I know it's time to get off the phone. I tell him I'll see him later.

"Yeah," he says. "Ta."

Slightly annoyed, though I have no right to be, I say bye.

I guess if I were a better man, I'd tell Jaime how the sound of his voice makes me feel. But I can't bring myself to say things like that.

Not without it sounding like, "Hey, man, you've got a great voice, no homo."

Wyatt – the effects of Ritalin nearly gone – is pounding on my door with the basketball.

*In the House Where Mabel Normand Lived*

After Wyatt lets me win at one-on-one – I got less game than his broken Playstation 2 – we go pick up Lindsay and I take them both over to St. Benedict's, where Susan runs the children's ministry and they have bells practice.

Susan has her desk and computer at one end of the little kids' Sunday school room, filled with kindergartener-sized chairs and low-to-the-ground tables. The latest display features red construction-paper hearts with badly-crayoned Xeroxed Saviors. Each one has the caption "Jesus Loves Me" and the names of the kids.

Bells practice is in the room next door. Lindsay wants me to stay and watch, but I don't want to hang around any longer than the time it takes for them to put on their white gloves; I need to exchange car keys with my sister so I can get going over to Jaime's.

"Busy today?" I ask Susan.

She makes a face. "I have to make a report on the budget for the vestry," she says. "I'm really nervous about it."

"You'll be fine," I tell her. She hadn't worked in years, except volunteer work at the school and church. Then the woman who ran the children's ministry got cancer and Susan took over, supposedly temporarily, but it's been several months now and the woman won't be back for several more – if then.

Susan is blossoming again, like when she was 17. I'd give her a kiss for reassurance right now if it didn't seem a little un-Episcopalian.

When Susan and I were kids, people used to think we were twins. Sometimes we let them think that.

Susan was born – “ironically born,” Dad said – on Labor Day and I came along the next August, so thanks to the September 1 birthday cutoff in the New York City public schools, we were always in the same grade if not the same class.

Susan and I are the same age only for one month a year.

Not long after Mom died – when Susan and I were both five – we moved into the house off Victory Boulevard in Tottenville, Staten Island. Built in 1892 in the Queen Anne style, it’s one of those elaborate gingerbread houses with a tower, dormers, bay windows, a corbelled chimney, and what Dad called “excessive ornament.” Nearly every exterior surface is covered with trim.

It seemed magical when we were little. Dad used to call it “a house fit for a queen.” He would tell everyone who came there – even the UPS guys – how Mabel Normand, the Queen of Comedy in the silent film era, had once lived there with her mother.

Mabel was seventeen, a sexy tomboy sleeping in my bedroom, when she went from being an artist’s model in Manhattan to acting in her first film short, *Saved From Herself*.

Vitagraph and Biograph churned out these little movies every few days as the money rolled in like crazy. In the beginning, as a member of D.W. Griffith’s repertory company of players, Mabel would be a leading lady in a one-reeler one week and an extra in the background the next.

One day when they were shooting on Long Island, Mabel accidentally became a comedy star. Because there was nothing for her to do in the movie, she’d put on a swimsuit to go sunbathing at a nearby pier. The director thought it would be funny to have a guy watching her through binoculars as she cavorted in the water. In those



days they used to make films on the spot, improvising without a script, doing whatever struck them as funny or tragic or dramatic.

Mabel was small, doe-eyed, and athletic – sort of like Jaime. Back in Staten Island, I've still got all the Normand memorabilia Dad collected, from a Charles Dana Gibson pen-and-ink drawing of Mabel as a teenager to a 1927 autographed photo at a time when her career was on the skids and her life was in tatters.

In 1914 she left our house and New York to move to California, where she appeared in the first American feature-length comedy, *Tillie's Punctured Romance*. She became a star in pictures with Charlie Chaplin and Fatty Arbuckle and the Keystone Cops. Mabel threw pies, took pratfalls, kicked men back. "I wasn't satisfied just being kicked," she told reporters.

Mabel also squandered herself, pushing her luck to its limit. She became a drug addict and alcoholic.

Dad blamed it on the money Mabel made: "She was just a kid, and they paid her so much she started tipping shopgirls with thousand-dollar bills."

In the twenties, when slapstick went out and romance came in, Mabel couldn't make the transition. The public turned against her after she became a suspect in the murder of the director William Desmond Taylor. Supposedly they were lovers, but Dad's theory was that Taylor was gay and that their real shared love was cocaine.

"Everyone in Hollywood back then was on cocaine," Dad would tell Susan and me when we were college students. He let us smoke pot in the house but made us promise never to get into cocaine. Susan and I weren't the types anyway.

Dad also believed that all the movie stars and directors in the 1920s were gay or bisexual. After the Taylor murder, Mabel's career took a nosedive and it

pretty much ended after another scandal, when her chauffeur shot a man with Mabel's gun. In the brouhaha, her drug addiction became public knowledge.

"They said her chauffeur shot the other guy because they were both involved with the same woman," Dad said, "but I bet the two men were actually lovers. Of course they couldn't print that back then."

Sometimes I thought Dad said things like that as part of his long campaign to get me to come out. He never liked any of my high school girlfriends. "Why are you wasting your time and hers?" he'd say when I came home from a date on Saturday night. I'd just stomp off to my room and slam the door. He never had anything bad to say about any of Susan's boyfriends, not even the ones who were perpetually stoned.

Dad got me and Susan and one of her nicer boyfriends tickets for *Mack and Mabel*, the Broadway musical about Mabel and her longtime lover, the director Mack Sennett.

I expected the show to be great because I really liked Jerry Herman's other musicals. I had played Barnaby in the Curtis High School production of *Hello, Dolly!*, and if anything, I loved *Mame* even more.

But they couldn't recreate the elaborate sight-gag slapstick of Sennett's silent films on a stage. Mack and Mabel kept getting together and breaking up for no good reason. Mabel was dead of an overdose long before the show was over, so for a musical comedy, the story was sort of a downer. Still, when it was over, Susan and I applauded wildly for Robert Preston and Bernadette Peters. It wasn't their fault they got stuck with a lame script.

I wonder if Artie Chavez will remember to say *lame* instead of *gay*.

Jaime says *lame* is lame and I should have told Artie to say *burnt*.

*The Diving Girl*

The first time Lindsay made me laugh was when she was three years old and Grant had taught her to talk like a Valley Girl. She performed the routine for me on the first visit I made to California since she was a baby.

Lindsay started gymnastics when she was eight years old. Neither Grant nor Susan pushed her into it. Lindsay threw herself into gymnastics wholeheartedly, the way she does everything. Susan drove her all over the Valley when Lindsay's coach kept moving to new venues. The whole family went to gym meets all over the West Coast. I attended one in Santa Barbara, where she won three first places.

But gymnastics is hard on young bodies, and eventually Lindsay developed a knee problem. She'd try to ignore the pain, but Wyatt would catch her limping and tell their parents. The doctors made her stop for a while, and on one of my yearly visits, Lindsay seemed to have ice on her knee half the time I'd see her.

By my next trip, Lindsay had started diving. It's a lot easier on her knee. Sometimes I've gone out to diving practice at the Thousand Oaks High School pool. I sit with Susan and the other parents in the bleachers. I only half-listen to all the diving-parents gossip about the coach and his peculiar ways.

Lindsay has shown me videos of her coach as a skinny teenager winning meets in the old Soviet Union. He's married now, with a little kid, and he gets impatient with Lindsay when she doesn't like to try new things, like some fillip to her double somersault. I watch the other kids, too: one boy about 17 is really good and also cute. Lindsay doesn't look at him the way the other girls do.

She watches 7<sup>th</sup> *Heaven*, not *Dawson's Creek*, and what she likes about Jared is that he's a really great diver.

Looking coltish in her red swimsuit, Lindsay reminds me of Susan when she began working as a lifeguard at a beach club on South Beach, the summer I went to musical comedy camp. A much more permissive parent than Susan, Dad let us do whatever we wanted.

When I came home from camp, I got Susan to start smoking pot, and soon after that she became more interested in boys than in sports. It made perfect sense to me.

I think Lindsay will be a late bloomer like her mother.

In sixth grade, Susan had a limerick published in our mimeographed class literary magazine:

*In a restaurant one night while I dined  
A wallet I happened to find  
I soon found the owner  
Who sure pulled a boner  
In leaving his wallet behind.*

I had to explain to Susan why this limerick had all the guys in the class snickering. She didn't know what a boner was.

If I wanted to blackmail Susan, I would threaten to recite this poem to Wyatt and Artie and Artie.

The same issue of our class literary magazine published my first story, a version of Little Red Riding Hood, set in the Soviet Union, called "Little Red Counter Spy." In the end, the CIA man comes in and rescues Little Red Riding Hood by cutting off the head of the evil Commissar who'd pretended to be her sick Babushka in bed.

I ended the story by using the concluding line of a story in one of Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* books that I'd read:

"Nothing more needed to be said."

My teacher edited it so that the last line of my story read:

“Nothing more could be said – no head, no speech.”  
Some kids write, some kids dive.

When we were at Staten Island Community College, I became friends with this guy who also used to hang around the Theater Department. Although he was really fem, I didn’t find him attractive because he was kind of a jerk. Still, I figured that the few of us who were gay had to stick together. We used to hang out with Susan and her friends, too.

After we took a class in British literature, this guy wrote a poem about Susan. Called “The Virgin Lifeguard of Death,” it was a stupid poem, worshipful and ridiculing, pretentious and mock-pretentious.

I told him if he ever showed to anyone else, I would beat the crap out of him.

He was about the only person at SICC I could make that threat to credibly. We stayed in touch over the years, and I went to his memorial service. He was basically a nice guy.

Mabel Normand was the I Don’t Care Girl. Lindsay, like her mother, is just the opposite.

But even Lindsay isn’t immune to living in L.A. She likes to google herself and look at all her scores at various diving meets. I’ve seen her smile as she stares at the monitor.

And I don’t know if she’ll ever become an ingénue. It’s funny, but Jaime – who says he was never an innocent – has that puppyish, plaintive look you’d expect to see on Lindsay’s face.

Mabel Normand starred in a movie called *The Diving Girl*. One day I’ll write a story about Lindsay with that title, but it will have to wait till she’s older and I’ll have to disguise her really well. It won’t have the word *virgin* anywhere in the manuscript.

*In the House Where My Brother-in-Law Lives*

Back home, I change into something that's probably too young for me and go into the main house to find Grant drinking Merlot and eating the last of the Cedarlane couscous-and-vegetable low-fat wraps that I'd gotten at Whole Foods Market. They're hard to find, and when the one here on Ventura Boulevard didn't have any more, I bought all the ones I could find at their Fairfax Avenue store and rushed home before they thawed out.

Grant notices my frown and says, "Everything all right?"

"Yeah, fine," I say, aware that I have always relied on the kindness of my brother-in-law. I'll nuke the beans-and-cheese burrito instead. "How was your day?"

Grant sighs. The first time I tried to describe him to Jaime, the adjectives that came to mind were *florid*, *jovial*, and *loud*, but lately Grant seems worn down, his bonhomie forced. "Fine, just fine," he says, but he can't resist adding, "if you like putting up drywall."

I'm familiar with the metaphor. Grant has been a periodontist for a long time, but now the work is mostly implants, so he's bored with it. I can't imagine periodontics ever having been exciting, but whatever challenges it once held for Grant now seem to be gone. I've seen the law school catalogs he's been receiving in the mail along with the booklet on the LSAT.

"Mm," I say, nodding, as I press 1 on the microwave.

"Do you want to go over to Fry's with me?" Grant asks me. "I really need to get a new CD burner."

"Can't," I say. "Maybe tomorrow? I'm seeing Jaime."

Grant pours himself another glass of wine. His tie is loose. It rides too high over his belly. "Sure, tomorrow would be great. So how are you and Jaime doing?"

The microwave rings, I turn over the burrito and the paper towel I've wrapped it in and press 1 again.

"Okay."

When Susan first married Grant, I was afraid to be left alone with him because I had no idea what we'd find to talk about.

"You shouldn't take him for granted," my brother-in-law tells me. When I don't say anything, he says, "You don't want to be a lonely old man, Rich."

"I don't?"

He snorts. I try to figure out if that's a drop of Merlot coming out of his nose. "Settling down isn't a crime," Grant says, and then finishes off my couscous-and-veggies wrap. I get the burrito from the microwave, put it on a paper plate and sit across the kitchen table from Grant.

"In Nevada it is," I say stupidly, hoping he'll stop. But Grant is too bullish. After being his brother-in-law this long, I know I can't deflect him that easily.

"You and Jaime need to commit to each other."

"He's too young."

"I've got patients twenty years older than you that have trophy wives a lot younger than Jaime," Grant tells me. "They have great marriages, some of them."

"I'm sure," I say. Grant wants me to commit to Jaime, commit to California, give up New York and sell the house in Staten Island so he and Susan can have half the profits of the sale. That way he can cut back the hours on his practice and go to law school.

My brother-in-law has never been subtle. He was the least subtle guy Susan was ever involved with, and at first I didn't get the attraction. I do now, but the man is relentless. Looking at the weather map in the *Daily*

*News*, he'll turn to me and say, "I don't see why anyone would want to live where they have to dress like the guy on the Alaska Airlines planes."

Grant's met Jaime all of once, but still he says, "What I like about him is that he doesn't have that too-cool-for-school attitude of some of your other friends."

Now Grant leans over and squeezes me on the shoulder. I've always hated when he does that and what he says next. "Don't fight happiness," he growls. It's too Deepak Chopra for me.

I don't know what to say. Grant once bought this thing called a Chi Machine.

"As far as I'm concerned," Grant says, "*mi casa es su casa*. But you and Jaime should have your own *casa*."

I'm finished with the burrito and want to leave so badly I just talk. "Yeah, I know, I can't be Kato Kaelin forever."

"You're not Kato Kaelin here, buddy," he says. "You're family. What's in New York? It smells awful."

"That's only because the one time you were there, it was during a garbage strike," I tell him. Grant grew up in Pasadena, met Susan when she was visiting friends in Oregon. He hates the East Coast.

"That movie star who lived in your old house didn't stay there," he says with finality.

"I've got to get going," I say to my sister's husband. "Tomorrow, Fry's, definitely." And I practically run to the driveway. I don't want Grant to move my minimal plot forward too quickly.

### *Shit Like Flying Grandmothers*

Dewayne's book had some poems that I later found out were about Jaime.



Some are only okay, like one that has a cliché about his crotch's nine-digit zip code.

My favorite is "Shit Like Flying Grandmothers."

When Dewayne met Jaime at a party in a Dumbo loft and found out he was Colombian – okay, Jaime's *parents* were Colombian – Dewayne talked about how much he loved Garcia Marquez, that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was his favorite novel.

Jaime just looked down at his drink. "I hate shit like flying grandmothers," he told Dewayne.

That's the moment Dewayne fell in love with him.

I can relate.

Seeing Jaime that first time, I had a crush on him the size of Ariel Sharon.

Jaime also hates flying cows, as in Marc Chagall paintings.

And Jaime didn't like the one silent movie short we saw together, *Mabel's Dramatic Career*, about a mousy housemaid wooed and rebuffed by a harebrained young guy, played by Mack Sennett, who ends up regretting his loss. Years later, he's watching a movie starring Mabel the former maid and he tries to save her from the guy who's menacing her in the film-within-the-film. Held back by his fellow audience member Fatty Arbuckle, Sennett yells at the villain, tries to blow out the burning fuse of a bomb and winds up shooting a gun at the screen.

Jaime thought it was boring. "I just can't get into stuff like that," he told me.

### *The Suburbs of Passion*

When I was in my senior year at Richmond College – back then it was an upper-division school taking up three floors of an office building across from Borough Hall on Stuyvesant Place, just up from the ferry terminal

– I had an internship at the NBC studios in Brooklyn. I would drive down Bay Street to the Verrazano Bridge – I always took the upper level, for the view – and take the Belt Parkway to Coney Island Avenue all the way to Avenue M.

This was before word processing and I used to type up and photocopy scripts for the soap opera *Somerset*. It was a spinoff of NBC's soap opera *Another World* and for a while the shows were called *Another World: Bay City* and *Another World: Somerset* until the first show reverted to its original name and our show became just *Somerset*. Somerset was the fictional city in which it was set.

It was a typical daytime drama of the time, with doctors, lawyers, unplanned pregnancies, secret affairs, meddling relatives, corny dialogue and long close-ups at the end of scenes with organ music swelling as they cut to a commercial. Or maybe I'm just imagining the organ music.

The actors back then didn't have to be so gorgeous; most of the men looked like Gore Vidal. But I had a crush on the actor who played the teenaged grandson of the mean old patriarch of the show, the head of a huge conglomerate called Delany Brands, though it was never made clear what products the company sold. The actor was gay, but he barely looked my way. Still, I made sure to be on the set when scenes had him swimming in the lake with his girlfriend. The actress who played his mother was really nice to me because she knew about my crush. She used to give me tips about acting all the time and once she took me to Cooky's for lunch. On the show she played a neurotic alcoholic who was horribly worried that her son would find out that her husband wasn't his real father.

Actually, the plot that interested me most concerned another family. There were various things going on, but I

always remember the script that had dialogue between this married couple who were in their fifties or so, which seemed real old to me at the time.

The wife, who had all the money, found out that her husband was having an affair with his secretary. She asked him why he had done it, and he said that he'd always thought she'd been happy having "a marriage of convenience."

"Haven't we always lived in the suburbs of passion?" he asked her.

I remember typing that line, and the next one, her response:

"Just because we always have doesn't mean we can't change – even at our age."

God, it was corny.

Staten Island is part of New York City. The Valley is part of Los Angeles. But they're still suburbs.

I've never lived anywhere else.

### *They Shoot Hyundais, Don't They?*

As I make the turn from Woodlake Avenue onto Victory Boulevard, I think about the weakness of dialogue. Does it really accomplish anything? After all, nobody cared that Mabel Normand and Fatty Arbuckle never said a word onscreen.

I'm not scared of the Ventura Freeway. But somehow the streets of the Valley seem more real.

Mabel Normand found the Southern California geography surreal, a lot like her sudden success. L.A. was a ready-made geographic joke that bred joke cities like Canoga Park and Tarzana and Reseda, and the excesses of its space made East Coast jokers like Mack and Mabel go nuts.

Grant is a joker too, but he's comfortable here, a native. So is Wyatt. But I'm no joker. I just play one on TV and in my stories. I'll always be an outsider here.

Staten Island and New York have more reality.

I anticipate what Jaime would say to that: *It's only because wherever you aren't seems more real to you.*

In twenty-first century traffic, you can't have Keystone Kops chases anymore.

I pull over into a shopping plaza with a Starbucks. Jaime won't go into one. We must patronize local coffee bars, no matter how bad their service is, because of globalization or something.

Waiting in line to be served, I stand behind two women and try to figure out whether they're talking Farsi or Hebrew.

Because Jaime will notice the container if I take the latte in the car, I decide to sit down and drink it in the store. It's a "tall," so it won't take long to finish it. A guy at the next table provides amusement as he keeps typing a few lines into his laptop and then calls up someone I assume is his agent to tell her what he's written. It appears to be a moronic sitcom episode, but if I tried to describe the writer's side of the cell phone conversation it would sound so clichéd you'd accuse me of making it up.

Then I hear a child's voice: "Are you an old man?"

I look down and there's a boy about three or four. I'm in love. "*Of course* I'm an old man," I tell him in a sing-songy way – at about the same time his mother, embarrassed, calls out, "Matthew, can't you see he's not an old man?"

"No," I say, looking at the kid. We have the same haircut. "Your son is very observant."

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"Well, *I am* an old man. I'll be 52 in August."

“Shut up!” she says, not trying to silence me but giving me an expression similar to the “Get out of here!” we used in the old days. I get this reaction all the time.

“Really,” I tell her. “I’m old enough to be his grandfather.”

She just looks at me as if I’m insane. I’m glad I didn’t say the lie that first crazily crossed my mind: “I have a grandson his age.” Maybe I *am* insane.

Dad would always berate me for telling people my real age. He lied up till the end. Just after his first heart attack, he bragged that nurses were coming into ICU because they couldn’t believe he was over 70.

Back on Victory, getting ready for tonight, I put Desaparecidos’ *Read Music/Speak Spanish* into the CD player as I pass Topanga Canyon Boulevard. Soon I’m in Canoga Park; on the right is Pierce, the community college where Lindsay will end up if she can’t get a diving scholarship to UCLA or USC. Soon the hidden nothing-burger L.A. River crosses underground by Reseda High School. Then we segue into Encino, where train tracks go by the side of the road around the Sepulveda Basin Recreation Area. At the 405 freeway, we’re in Van Nuys: grittier, urban, more Latino. By the time I get to where the 101 freeway crosses, I’m almost ready to make the turn up Lankershim, where Jaime lives.

There’s Doris Day parking in front of Jaime’s building, but he’s waiting outside for me.

Jaime looks double-fruit cute. No matter how hard I try to dress right, I can never manage to avoid looking just slightly September tenth. Jaime, on the other hand, would look good even in a burqa. Come to think of it, Jaime would look *especially* good in a burqa.

Jaime can wear something totally passé like a trucker hat and achieve uncool coolness with a look that screams *dork*.

But I won't describe Jaime too much because he's supposed to represent something I don't want to show with a lot of specificity. I'm going to show Jaime only through my eyes, and maybe through other people's, sort of like the way Galsworthy presented Irene in *The Forsyte Saga*.

Irene was supposed to represent capital-B Beauty or something. When the original BBC series came on when we were in college, I thought that in the end Irene was a cold monster. Susan felt she was right to be so cold to Soames: "He raped her, after all." I argued that Irene still shouldn't have held a grudge for thirty years.

Susan and I didn't like the recent version. It was a lot more sexual, but everyone had the wrong hair color. Jaime felt it was just fine and even thought Soames was hot. No wonder he likes me.

The first thing everybody notices about Jaime, of course, is the left side of his face. A port-wine stain the shape of Italy goes from his upper cheek down to the corner of his lip and across (the toe of the boot). It's pinkish now, not deep purple, because of all the laser treatments Jaime had starting when he was eleven.

His mother took him to the hospital in Manhattan after hearing about the new procedure. A group of doctors gave him liquid Valium and goggles for his eyes. Jaime has never really described what the surgery was like, but I know the flashlamp-pumped dye laser left him with weird scars on his face for weeks afterwards. He'd go back every two months, with them increasing the power of the laser by half each visit. Jaime doesn't talk about it much – not like I would – and you'd think looking so strange as a kid had absolutely no effect upon him.

Saying it hurt too much, even with anesthetic, Jaime insisted on stopping the treatments when he was 17. By then his parents had pretty much given up on him and

moved to Miami, so Jaime lived with his grandmother and aunt in Queens. But the stain is a nice shade of pink now, and I don't think I'm alone in thinking it's attractive.

Some people pretend not to notice it and look at Jaime sideways. It's rare that someone will talk about it. Once, at a party in West Hollywood – around the time I thought our relationship would never get out of development hell – a drunk girl asked Jaime, “So what's that thing on your face?”

Jaime told her and she asked if it hurt.

He laughed.

Jaime once told Dewayne that everyone has an imperfection, a major flaw, and that he was lucky his was out there for everyone to see. It's in a poem that mentions the port-wine stains on Gorbachev's bald head and the ones only Jaime would know about, on Antonio Sabato Jr.'s chest and Joshua Jackson's abdomen.

It feels a little different to the touch, but it's not an unpleasant feeling.

The first line of Dewayne's poem:

*I know it's not a metaphor*

### *Las Cucarachas Entran Pero No Pueden Salir*

We drive down Lankershim to the North Hollywood subway station, where I manage to find a marginally legal parking spot. We walk through the arching bandshell entranceway with its citrus colors – I always expect to smell tangerines – and go down the long escalator to the mezzanine to get our tickets. The Red Line is run on an honor system, with no one watching to make sure you've got your ticket. To New York subway veterans like Jaime and me, the invisible security system here seems very California.

As we're waiting on the platform downstairs, I tell Jaime about the little boy in Starbucks, making the Starbucks a checkout line at the supermarket. He says the kid must have been left really confused because I said I was an old man and his mother insisted I wasn't.

"If the kid really had a question about it," Jaime says, "it wasn't resolved." Jaime's response is one I wouldn't have thought of in a million years.

A train comes and we get on one of the trapezoidal cars. Naturally there are seats. It's not like *Blade Runner* or the Lexington Avenue IRT: everything is clean and fast and airy as we go under the Santa Monica Mountains at 70 mph. Jaime and I don't talk to each other, and I'm wondering if we'd be talking if we were winding down Laurel Canyon in my car. At Universal City nobody gets on or off.

"You want to go to ExIncendo afterwards?" I ask Jaime.

"Sweet."

I nod, and we move toward Hollywood/Highlands. Jaime is frowning. I'm on his right and there's no trace of the stain on his other side. His left side is actually his good one, I think. Jaime looks head-on in mirrors, hams it up in photos.

I think about saying something about the invasion of the 818s, but I'm afraid I may have used that material before.

Sometimes I fear silences with Jaime. At the beginning I was always afraid of his thinking I was stupid, and when he sparkled after I said something I figured it was just a fluke, like in one of those really awful boy-band songs that manages to slip in the right hook somewhere in the midst of all that desperate sampling.

As we get off at Hollywood and Vine, a firefighter-cute Korean guy who's with what appears to be his



girlfriend is giving Jaime heavy stare time. Jaime's spider sense must be tingling but he doesn't seem to care. He's looking up at the station's ceiling, made up of thousands of actual metal film reels.

Like the West 4<sup>th</sup> Street station in the Village, which has three entrances, none on West 4<sup>th</sup> Street, the Hollywood and Vine station actually surfaces about a block away from the famous intersection. Despite all the civic revival talk, Hollywood and Vine is still tattered and worn. What was once the Brown Derby is now some hideous green building that houses a tattoo parlor, with the only trace of the restaurant landmark a little decorative brown derby at the station entrance.

Although he's so small, Jaime's steps are longer than mine. Onstage in plays, I was always self-conscious about how I walked.

If there were a sitcom about me, the theme song would be Green Day's "Basket Case" with the lyrics about my sometimes giving myself the creeps.

### *Angels Flight Redux*

A few years ago Susan and I were two of the four "class parents" on Wyatt's third grade trip to downtown L.A. Most West Valley kids don't go there very often. Susan was afraid she'd get carsick on the bus, but I gave her some ginger capsules and let her have the seat by the window. I felt as if we were back at P.S. 16.

Our first stop was Olvera Street, where La Ciudad de la Reina de los Angeles began. I was assigned to look after four kids, two girls and two boys.

One of the boys, an obnoxious rich kid whose father was a big studio executive, asked me to hold a twenty-dollar bill he had for safe keeping. Later he retrieved the money to buy worthless crap at the flea market stands and

some disgustingly sweet candy at Grand Central Market. When we were home that evening, Wyatt and the Arties told me nobody liked this boy. "He always tells lies," Artie Chang said.

The other boy in my group had incredible wavy blond hair and a sleepy smile, and while I'm no pedo, I knew someday he'd drive girls and gay boys wild. But he was the biggest pain, getting lost all the time, wandering away to Starbucks while we were having lunch.

The girls, as usual, were the easiest. One was tiny and dark, the other fat and tall, and they actually held hands and kept close to me as we wandered through the lobby of the Bradbury Building with its wrought-iron elevators. Later, in the children's room of the new main library, I got on the electronic catalog and showed them which branches of the system had my books.

"Trying to impress girls?" Susan asked as she passed us with a couple of her charges.

"Didn't work then, doesn't work now," I said because it seemed the thing to do.

The girls wanted to know if I wrote scary stories. I told them no, that I didn't know how.

For me the day's highlight was the trip up Bunker Hill on Angels Flight, the two-car funicular railway. Back in Staten Island, we used to call our above-ground subway system the Toonerville Trolley, but Angels Flight filled the bill more closely.

The ride up took only a couple of minutes, but to some of the kids, it seemed as thrilling as a trip on the Concorde. Others, like the movie executive's son, were too jaded by Disneyland and Vegas.

About a year after our class trip, one of the two Angels Flight cars became detached from its cable and hurtled down the tracks, colliding with its sister car. An old man died, and his wife was critically injured.

They closed Angels Flight. I hope they'll start it up again. Lindsay's never been on it, and neither has Jaime.

The class trip took place before the Red Line was extended to North Hollywood. I think Hollywood and Vine may have been the final stop back then.

Once upon a time they planned to extend the Red Line out to the West Valley, with a terminus near us, at Warner Center. But it never happened.

Moving bodies around in urban space is a slow process, like moving minds in and out of a relationship. I don't know what that means.

The improvised silent one-reelers with Mabel Normand sometimes didn't work. But the next week there was always another movie to make, so the stinkers didn't matter so much.

### *Waste of Ink*

We're in our seats at the Henry Fonda Theater, about a dozen rows back from where we were last October, the last time Bright Eyes played L.A. Even then, Conor Oberst no longer seemed such a teen angstrel. His stage-frightened trembling had become more of a semi-confident warble or quiver.

There are songwriters with more craft, and he's definitely not the guitar player of a generation, but Oberst – I'm too old to refer to him as Conor – has all the corny qualities I appreciate: painful honesty, seemingly irrelevant tangents, a jaded hopefulness. Plus he's literary and often inarticulate. Hey, I know I'm supposed to show, not tell, but there are copyright laws, and description was never my forte.

Around us are undergrad English majors and adolescent girls – boys, too – in love. Some are probably even Lindsay's age, though I can't imagine her here.

Tonight Oberst's got only a quintet backing him up, not the dozen or so musicians that were onstage last time, so it seems more stripped down and intimate.

In front of a glowing red curtain, Oberst looks even younger than he is. I look over at Jaime and think about Mabel Normand before I get into the music.

Oberst plays new stuff, some of which comments on the war, as well as songs from the last album like "Waste of Paint," which at one point starts describing how he – I mean the narrator – was living with a perfect couple for a while and feeling weird because he's alone. Eventually it turns self-deprecating and self-referential.

Jaime likes "Don't Know When but a Day is Gonna Come."

"I don't think he's drunk," Jaime whispers in my ear. Not yet.

Oberst ends one song by muttering, "My mediocrity, my mediocrity."

A guy behind us yells out: "You're hot!"

"Actually, I feel kind of cold," Oberst says. Nobody laughs.

At the end of the set, his lank dark hair obscuring his eyes, Conor – okay, so I'm not a journalist – swigs wine from a bottle.

"I had this dream in which I was superdrunk and supertired in front of all these people," he says before exiting stage left.

### *Jaime's Unpunctured Romance*

I've told Jaime it doesn't bother me that he still has feelings for Dewayne.

"You never stop loving whoever you love," I've said. "Why must you try?"

I don't tell Jaime, but it's a line I remember – probably imperfectly – from *After the Fall*, Arthur Miller's underrated play about his own life and Marilyn Monroe. When I was in high school, I ordered the Theater Recording Society LP of it, with Jason Robards in the starring role. Because I was under eighteen, legally I didn't have to pay for it, but Dad made me.

Susan listened to the first act and then said it was too dark, that she didn't want to hear the rest of it because it would probably only get worse. Given Susan's point of view, she was right.

The album is still in Staten Island.

Dewayne is still in the East Village.

What I don't say to Jaime is that Dewayne himself has reassured me: "Don't worry, I'm not on a jihad for him."

Sometimes it's a good thing to emulate my sister and think the best of everyone. I often think Mabel Normand did that too.

Dewayne also told me that sometimes Jaime could be "a handful."

Probably he meant was that Jaime can be like Pikachu in the Pokemon stuff that Wyatt had when he was little. Jaime looks cute and cheerful, but when provoked, he can emit devastating bolts of electricity.

I've learned how not to provoke. By now it's become a habit.

### *Saved from Myself*

Back at Jaime's apartment, I try not to provoke but I can't resist talking about my age.

Jaime sighs. "If you did commercials, you'd be cereal dad, not father of the bride," he says.

I think about saying that sometimes I feel like incontinence-product *abuelo*, but because Jaime hates my self-deprecating little jokes, I try to avoid scattering them through the evening like creative-writing-class rimshots.

"And it's not like I'm taking my apple juice from a sippy cup. I mean, I was born in the sixties," Jaime feels he has to add.

"Just barely."

"Anyway," Jaime tells me, "you look totally beejeable. As your attorney, I advise you to stay the night."

It doesn't take much to convince me. Lately I've been forgetting to masturbate, so I have a bad case of MSB.

Now here's where I could insert the director's cut of a sex scene, but I'm just too depleted to do it. It wasn't very vanilla, but it would come off as banal to you. Instead, I'll just mention that it involved a piñata, mmkay?

Yeah, right.

Her career in decline, Mabel Normand married a co-star, Lew Cody, her counterpart in recklessness. They wed on the spur of the moment, after a night of hell-raising at several wild parties.

### *Six Degrees of Donald Crisp*

The first movie Donald Crisp appeared in was Mabel Normand's last one.

Donald Crisp's last movie was *Spencer's Mountain*, which starred Henry Fonda, as in the Henry Fonda Theatre.

Crisp was Mabel's opposite: sober-looking, stocky, distinguished. A great character actor who won an Oscar for *How Green Was My Valley*, he bought up land in the

San Fernando Valley when it was still agricultural. Very rich, he eventually served on the board of directors of Bank of America. At 93, Crisp died in his sleep in Van Nuys.

I can't sleep. Jaime's curled up in the fetal position. Before he dozed off, lying on his right side, Jaime mumbled, "Tonight made me feel very old. I mean, your nephew is closer to Conor's age than I am."

For once, it occurred to me that Jaime and I are a lot alike.

"Yeah, you've lived longer than Jesus," I told him, leaning over and kissing his stain. He smiled dreamily and closed his eyes.

Jaime's lived longer than Mabel Normand too.

I get out of bed, go over to Jaime's desk, which is overflowing with his iMac and papers and CDs and books. I pick up a paperback of *La Noche es Virgen*, a novel with a hunky boy St. Sebastian on the cover. It's by Jaime Bayly, a gay Peruvian postmodernist who needs to be translated into English.

I see that my Jaime – pronounced *Jay-me*, of course, not like Bayly's *Chai-me* – has his Spanish-English dictionary nearby. Reading en español is not much easier for him than it is for me.

I got a 97 in the New York Regents exam in third-year Spanish at Curtis, but by now I've forgotten the subjunctive. Once I knew that second set of tenses indicating hypothetical happenings, things you want or demand or desire, stuff that may or may not happen. The subjunctive mood is for dreamers and for love affairs that end badly.

When asked by a reporter how many of the books in her huge library she'd read, Mabel Normand said, "Not one. But I've read the reviews."

It was a lot more than most movie stars ever did.

### *The Road to Woodland Hills*

I'm wearing the red T-shirt I left at Jaime's the last time I stayed over. It's from Pentecost at St. Benedict's and would be okay in the front because it just has a little logo with the church's name and the Episcopalian shield. But I can't wear it in public because in the back it says *Seek the Lord While He May Be Found*, with the word *Jesus* in reverse lettering between *Lord* and *While* so you can see it only if you look hard. I once wore it as I jogged down Victory Boulevard and cars would honk as they drove past me.

But I'm not driving back on Victory Boulevard this morning. Sometimes the Ventura Freeway is exactly what I need.

### *Ladies of a Certain Age*

Around noon, Susan and I go on our long-planned excursion to the Gilded Rose Manor in Northridge. It's a tea shoppe spelled just that way that promises "A Victorian Experience." We have the royal tea, which includes not only all the tea we can drink, but three different items served agonizingly slowly: a selection of dainty cut-up sandwiches, some on crustless white bread dyed pink and pale green; a savory – a phyllo-type pastry with a spinach and cheese filling; and trays of sickeningly sweet little pastries. They have about seventy varieties of tea, but because neither of us is adventurous, Susan selects English breakfast while I opt for Formosa oolong.

Susan and Grant are strict vegetarians, and so were the kids until recently. But now Wyatt and Lindsay eat chicken, turkey, fish sticks. I eat everything but pork. We get to select three kinds of sandwiches each. Susan



goes for cucumber, cream cheese, and egg salad. I also get egg salad, but my other choices are watercress and turkey-and-cheese.

The pretend-parlor where we're seated has only one other occupied table. A woman of a certain age is reading A.S. Byatt's *Possession* as if she's a perfectly-cast extra.

Susan and I talk about the kids' learning disabilities: Lindsay's problems with visual processing – her grades have all been A's since she got her textbooks on audiotape – and Wyatt's ADHD and his dyslexia.

"Well, I guess he can't be a priest," I say. "Because he'd read *Acts of God* as *Cats of Dog*."

Susan blinks, takes a sip of her tea. Our conversations are not what you'd call Twintalk. I remember the sixth-grader who had to be told what a boner was.

"You know, Grant loves you like a brother," she tells me. "Hey, he loves you more than he does his own brother."

"Yeah, well, I'm not a nutjob like Ralph."

When Wyatt was four, he had a little ponytail. Grant and Susan left Ralph to baby-sit while he was visiting from Idaho, and Ralph took scissors and cut off the ponytail. He said it made Wyatt look like a girl.

Back in the early Seventies, after seeing the movie *Cabaret* for the second time, Susan and I went to a Greek diner on Hylan Boulevard. My hair was long and I was wearing a black pocket T-shirt. The old waiter said to us, "What'll it be, girls?" I was embarrassed; Susan was mystified and then outraged.

I look at my sister now and just say, "I love Grant, too. But you've got to admit that sometimes he's weird."

"We're all weird," Susan says, taking a finger sandwich from the tray. "But in what particular way do you think Grant is weird?"

"Um, I don't know," I say. "I don't think he recommends Trident for his patients who chew gum."

Susan smiles, and I take a finger sandwich with pink bread. Susan hated it when her friends would ask me what kind of stories I wrote and I would tell them shitty stories.

"I never understood why those reviewers said your stories are too cute," Susan says. "How can anything be too cute? It's like being too nice."

But I do think things can be too cute, and I know what the critics mean.

Before I can say anything about cuteness, Susan looks around, shivers, and says, "Don't you feel like we're in *The Wings of the Dove*?"

I didn't know Susan had seen the movie too. I remember it as a VH-1 version of Henry James.

Susan says the movie had nice scenes of England and Italy but she hated the ending. I'm not sure if it's because she found the sex in the final scene gratuitous or mechanical. I don't want to find out.

E.M. Foster said that because he had no problem writing *fuck*, on a certain level he couldn't really deal with Henry James. Or that's how I remember it.

After our trifles are served, Susan says that she and I were both pretty promiscuous.

"I guess," I say.

"I can't believe Dad let me have all those boys sleep over," Susan says.

I ask her the real name of the guy I remember only as Orange Juice. One night he came into the house chugging a little carton of Tropicana, and Dad said to him, "Son, I'd prefer if you finish that outside. I don't allow orange juice in this house." The guy was mystified until Susan explained about the boycott over Anita Bryant.

Susan can't remember the guy's name. Her mind is on other things.

"Look," she tells me, "I won't say Jaime could be your last chance."

Then why is she saying it? And why am I thinking about those Christmas Eves when we'd take the ferry into Manhattan and walk to midnight mass at Trinity Church. It kept getting earlier and earlier through the Seventies as the New York crime rate shot up until eventually it was at 8 p.m. It was the only time Dad ever went to church. I don't know where Susan gets being religious from. Not from Grant. On the other hand, when I'm really upset, going to mass does calm me down.

All that Formosa oolong is making me have to pee like a ten-alarm.

Then Susan says, "I have an idea for a book for you to write. A novel."

Writers get this all the time. "About what?"

"Well, everything would be the same as it is now, except Gore got elected."

I laugh in the middle of a swallow and start choking. The lady with the novel looks over at us. It is very un-Victorian.

"What's so funny?" Susan asks. I see she was serious, that her feelings are hurt.

"Nothing," I assure her, suppressing a giggle. "I get it, alternate history. Like Philip K. Dick's book that has Hitler winning World War II."

"Are you equating Hitler and Gore?"

"No, no, it's an interesting idea...I'll think about it."

After we finally finish – I get most of my sweet pastries put in a brown bag to take to the kids – we stroll over to the gift shop, where Susan looks around at the twee little items on sale. She's looking for tiny plates with a picture of a certain kind of English house. I can

live with anyone else's tastes: Dad's, Susan's, Grant's, Jaime's.

On the drive to get our space outside the junior high, I tell Susan about the kid in Starbucks. She feels the mother muffed the situation.

"I would have taken the time to tell the little boy that he shouldn't put personal questions like that to strangers," Susan says.

I guess I don't think like other people.

I'm neither the Queen of the Parking Line nor the Queen of Comedy.

### *Men Are the New Women*

In the late afternoon, Grant and I head over to Fry's Electronics for a new CD burner. Wyatt wanted to look at some new video games, but he had a meeting of the Boy Scouts. I disapprove, but Susan says it's an "inclusive" troop, sort of like St. Benedict's being a "welcoming" church.

All the Fry's Electronics have themes, like 1950s SF with Martians and giant robots or ancient Egypt with King Tut tombs and a sphinx. The one in Woodland Hills has an Alice in Wonderland theme, with 15-foot figurines of Alice, the Mad Hatter, the Cheshire Cat and other Lewis Carroll characters.

Grant grabs a shopping cart. Somewhere in the cavernous store, we manage to find a shelf of CD burners. Looking through the display, we try to decipher their speeds, expressed by notations like 40X/12X/48X. Grant needs a larger memory because his current burner has buffer underrun, leading to numerous bad discs. He calls the bad discs *coasters*. We eventually settle on a product that will solve the problem.

And then there's Grant's other problem. He gets to that at the checkout line.

"So you must have had a nice night with Jaime," Grant says.

I guess he also has bought some electronic device allowing him to monitor not only my activities in North Hollywood but also my emotions. I remain as silent as Mabel Normand was onscreen.

Signing his credit card receipt, Grant starts in again about me and Jaime settling down.

Tired, I can only come up with only my stock response, about the difference in our ages: "It's like that sick feeling you get when you see Woody Allen movies and watch him making out with young women."

Grant tells me he hasn't seen a Woody Allen movie since the Eighties and I'll have to do better than that.

We put the CD burner in the trunk of Grant's convertible, a recent purchase to replace his old SUV. He said he traded in the Explorer for environmental reasons, but Susan thinks it's just midlife crisis. That must also account for his zeal to get me and Jaime together.

"Well, I just think it's Tuesday night," I tell Grant, "and instead of being with me, Jaime could be at Snatch at Cinespace, hanging with some girl who was on *Survivor* or that friend of a friend of Leo's. Or that guy who plays Mini Me."

I know how idiotic this must sound.

"You're crazy."

As we buckle up, I tell Grant about the little boy in Starbucks. He tells me there's no way I could be anybody's grandfather and it was stupid of me to say that. Grant didn't become a father till he was over forty.

People respond to stories in very different ways.

I think about how banal that last sentence is as Grant starts to turn left onto Victory. Suddenly out of nowhere, this Mitsubishi is speeding straight at us.

It's not going to yield and it's not going to slow down.

Everything moves in slow motion as I await the crash. It's going to hit us right on the passenger side.

I can't believe this is happening. We just went out to get a new CD burner.

Mabel Normand's last film was titled *One Hour Married*.

The impact is indescribable. Airbags explode out of nowhere.

*WWWEBDBD?*

Nobody died. I could be coy and not refer to Grant for a couple of pages, but it's not that kind of story. Besides, you know the crash was on my side.

The paramedics took our vitals and said Grant's blood pressure was a little high. "Your own BP is fine," one told me, and I asked him how he knew that.

"I just took it," he said. I guess I was too busy looking after Grant to notice. He was really distraught. He's overweight and older than I am, and I was afraid he'd have a heart attack.

Days later, I remember that when I told the paramedic I was 51, he asked me if I was confused: "Are you sure you're not 41?"

We went to the ER and waited a long while. Grant called Susan on her cell phone while she was at Lindsay's diving practice in Thousand Oaks and they met us at the hospital waiting room. Susan called the Changs, and Wyatt went home with them after Boy Scouts.

Grant and I had airbag burns and some cuts. He had a black eye and I had a fat lip, also from the airbag. They cleaned and bandaged our wounds and gave us tetanus shots.

The next day Grant and I felt like we had worked out too much. Two days after that we really started to hurt: our necks, his lower back, my upper back.

Grant got us a personal injury lawyer, one of his patients. We both made regular visits to the doctor and chiropractor and massage therapist. In the end, Grant hopes the other driver's insurance company will come up with a settlement offer that should give us \$10,000 or so each. I think he's overly optimistic, as usual.

Our pains disappeared after a few weeks, but it took me longer to bounce back than I'd expected.

"You were very lucky," Susan kept repeating.

In my late 20s back on Staten Island, on my way to Bayonne to meet a guy from a personals ad, I totaled my car on Richmond Terrace. My only injury was a bruise on my knee. Surviving that crash left me feeling exhilarated and almost invulnerable. But I'm older now, and it's not the same. I felt unmoored.

Following the accident, Jaime started coming over every day. Susan had Grant and the kids and the house and her church work to worry about, and I wasn't much help.

Even though I wasn't that messed up, I wanted to be taken care of. Still, I knew I couldn't go totally velcro with Jaime.

Lindsay really took to Jaime for some reason. She made him watch her diving movies and he even went with us to Starbucks for hot chocolate. Wyatt originally thought Jaime was a phony, but then Jaime pointed to his port-wine stain, saying he was a mutant.

One night, just when I was worrying that all this domesticity meant we'd jumped the shark, Jaime came over with some weapons-grade salsa for dinner. For me, he brought a silver ID bracelet, thin like the one Dad got me back in second grade. That one was engraved *Richard* even though everyone then called me Richie or

Rich. Jaime's one of the few people close to me who calls me Richard.

The bracelet Jaime got me said *WWWEBDB?*

He told me it stood for *What Would W.E.B. Du Bois Do?*

All I could manage when he put in on my wrist was, "Thanks, Jai." I know it's snarky and way too cute to be telling you that, but there it is.

Dying from tuberculosis and too much cocaine, Mabel Norman scribbled in her diary, *THIS THING IS APPALLING. (WHO CARES?)*

Jaime and I have debated whether Mabel didn't care anymore or if she was calling out, asking for someone to care.

Guess who took which side of the argument.

Maybe it all comes down to the parentheses.

Anyway, it's not like we're going to settle down to blissful domesticity in Silver Lake or Los Feliz. It's not that kind of story, either.

### *Shaolin*

When I get back to New York, I realize the house is a total ground zero so I call in some guys to clean it. They say if I pay them extra, they'll do the work in the nude.

Jaime has told me about Dewayne's cousin Natasha, a real estate broker with an office on Bay Street. I figured we might as well keep it in the family, so I have Natasha come over on a Saturday afternoon for a look-see. Dewayne comes too, and the house blows them both away.

"I've seen this house driving by on Victory Boulevard," Natasha says, "but now I'm in love with it!"



“Yeah, that and your cut of the sale price,” Dewayne says.

I tell her that a movie star named Mabel Normand had lived in the house, and Natasha says she remembers her from *Gone With the Wind*.

After the grand tour, Natasha comes up with a price that sounds unbelievable to me. If she can get me anything near that figure – well, a lot of things in L.A. will fall into place.

“Let’s roll,” I say, wondering if the New York housing bubble can wait a few months before popping.

I’m exhilarated and it’s still early, so we take a ride in the wayback machine and drive around. I show Dewayne and Natasha P.S 16 and we watch the little kids in the playground behind the school.

Dewayne points and says, “So you and your sister were those little kids once upon a time.”

“A long time ago,” I say, although all the kids in the playground look more like him and Natasha than like Susan and me.

We drive down Victory Boulevard, past Clove Lake Park and Silver Lake Park, crossing the expressway to the campus of the College of Staten Island. I explain that in the old days we had to go to the community college for two years and then to Richmond for our junior and senior years. And I tell Dewayne about this campus once being Willowbrook, the home for the retarded where Geraldo Rivera achieved news stardom by exposing the horrible conditions.

Natasha says that her friends say that CSI stands for the College of Stupid Idiots. I mock-harrumph like the theater-major alumnus I am. Although it falls flat, I feel like high jinks, something Mabel Normand would appreciate.

Following the route of the S-62 bus back to our old neighborhood, I lead Dewayne and Natasha into

Lakshmi's, one of the Sri Lankan restaurants and groceries at Victory and Cebra. It's mostly a takeout joint, but we grab one of the few sit-down seats at a table. A number of Sri Lankans have moved around here in recent years.

Dewayne only knows the Indian restaurants on East 6<sup>th</sup> Street in his neighborhood or the ones on 73<sup>rd</sup> Street in Jaime's Jackson Heights, so I go up to the counter and order for all of us. The closest thing to Lakshmi's I can find in L.A. is a Sri Lankan place in Tarzana called the Curry Bowl, which has yellow rice with bits of cinnamon stick in it, something I can't get here. But Lakshmi's homemade roast paan is to die for.

Over malu paan and elawalu roti, Dewayne starts talking about Wu-Tang Clan and how GZA, The Genius, grew up on Staten Island.

"He calls it Shaolin," Dewayne says.

When GZA was a kid, he'd take the ferry over to visit relatives at the Soundview Projects in the Bronx, where hip-hop culture was being born. Coming back on the ferry, he'd memorize the moves and the turns of phrases he'd witnessed, and he'd teach his little cousins, who became RZA and Ol' Dirty Bastard.

Natasha and Dewayne argue whether GZA's *Come Do Me* is brilliant rap or R & B bullshit.

I'm still wondering why he called Staten Island Shaolin.

Dewayne thinks GZA may still live here. "Maybe he'd be interested in buying your house," Dewayne says.

"Tons of people will be interested in that house," Natasha says.

Dewayne shrugs. "Things don't always work out the way you want them to," he says. "I've been waiting for a Hurricane Zora for years, but the hurricane season never lasts that long."

“Don’t mind this poet,” Natasha tells me. “You’ve got nothing to worry about. Just give me four weeks.”

I guess I won’t bother burying an upside-down statue of St. Joseph in the backyard.

### *Wait Until Summer*

Natasha didn’t lie. Twenty-four days later she sells the house for \$8,000 more than the asking price. On the longest day of the year, I call California with the good news.

Two nights later Dewayne comes over for an early dinner. It’s our last one, so I present him with a black T-shirt that says *Comprehension Is Not A Requisite For Cooperation*. At the new minor league ballpark near the ferry terminal, we watch the Staten Island Yankees play the Brooklyn Cyclones. Across the Narrows, there’s baseball in Brooklyn for the first time since the Dodgers left for L.A.

I’m leaving for L.A. – for good, I guess – in a couple of days. Jaime says he’s going to kiss me so hard I’ll get a foot hickey. But I’m no teenaged movie star, and I won’t end up like Miss Mabel Normand.

“So it was like in an old-time story,” Dewayne says during a lull in the eighth inning. “The car crash was an epiphany that made you decide to sell the house.”

“Eeew,” I say. “Oh, man, Dewayne, I hate shit like epiphanies worse than Jaime hates flying grandmothers.”

He laughs, smiles, nods his head. “I hear you,” he tells me.

If this were an even worse story or if Dewayne were not such a good poet – see, I *can* use the subjunctive – I’d have him say that night at Richmond County Bank Ballpark: “I hear you, brother.”

But it’s not, and he’s not, if it’s all the same to you.

*Listen, Jaime Camero*

Or if you prefer, there's the ending Grant suggested, in which I tell Dewayne about Dad's remaining a Dodgers fan even after they abandoned Ebbets Field for Chavez Ravine.

Grant has me say: "Dad knew everything. He even told us that everyone on the team knew about Sandy Koufax and nobody cared."

And then Dewayne says, "You mean that he was Jewish?"

Grant also thought I shouldn't have cut out my visit to his mother in the nursing home, but I told him that would go in another story in my next book.

When I asked Dewayne if he had a better idea than Grant, he replied that he wouldn't finish my stories if I promised not to finish his poems. When I pressed him, Dewayne said – with what I take to be false modesty – that he couldn't do white narrators but he'd definitely work in the two Victory Boulevards, a nice counterpart to opening with the two Arties.

Dewayne also reported that Natasha wanted her name changed and thought the penultimate section should be called "How That House Got Sold."

Susan was busy planning the fall children's program at St. Benedict's but said anything would be better than the ending of *Wings of the Dove*. She let the kids read selected portions of the story and had them write their own endings.

Wyatt's was: "California, here I come!"

Lindsay's was: "And they all lived happily ever after."

"I vote with the diving girl," Jaime tells me when I finally get home.

From here on in, Jaime gets the last word.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RICHARD GRAYSON has published over 200 stories in literary journals, anthologies and webzines since 1975 and has been the recipient of three fellowships in fiction from the Florida Arts Council and a writer-in-residence award from the New York State Council on the Arts. In 2004 he chronicled his campaign for the U.S. House of Representatives in his *Diary of a Congressional Candidate in Florida's Fourth Congressional District* at the website of McSweeney's. Born in Brooklyn, he has worked as a teacher and lawyer. Visit him at [www.richardgrayson.com](http://www.richardgrayson.com).









